

CHOICE

Independent information for smart consumers

Tests

LAUNDRY TABLETS

TOILET PAPER

MUFFIN MIXES

MICROWAVES

Folklore or fact?

HEALTH MYTHS
SCRUTINISED

Oriental carpets

DON'T GET TAKEN
FOR A RIDE

PHONE PLAN OPTIONS

It's a tough
call ...





HIH debacle

The Australian Consumers' Association is pleased that the federal government bowed to public pressure, including from the ACA, to hold a Royal Commission of Inquiry into the HIH failure, the magnitude of which seems to grow with each day.

We believe a Royal Commission is the only chance to get to the bottom of the corporate governance and regulatory failures, to make recommendations for necessary reform and to ensure that Australian consumers can regain some confidence in our system of financial services and their regulation.

Ordinary consumers with insurance policies in the HIH stable have been hard hit, particularly those relying on compensatory payments for their income. The many people who were shareholders in the company have lost their financial investment. Whatever the rescue package agreed to between federal and state governments and the insurance industry, we consumers will be paying for this private sector failure one way or another.

The Royal Commission must not only investigate the HIH failure and the behaviour of its directors and executives, but also scrutinise the actions of the regulators APRA (Australian Prudential Regulatory Authority) and ASIC (Australian Securities and Investments Commission). A range of unnamed industry commentators have said that "everybody knew" HIH was in deep trouble and so did the regulators. Why didn't the regulators do something? Did they miss or ignore the warning signs? Do they really have adequate powers to step in at any point?

A Royal Commission can subpoena evidence and witnesses, compel responsible ministers to provide evidence and, importantly, protect 'whistleblowers' who might provide vital information.

The HIH failure raises serious questions not only about insurance regulation but also about the adequacy of the regulation of life companies, superannuation and banks. For more information and discussion, go to www.choice.com.au and click on the HIH button.

Louise Sylvan, CEO

CHOICE

is published by the Australian Consumers' Association

YOUR LETTERS

We welcome the letters you send us — please always include a daytime telephone number so we can contact you quickly if we want to follow up your letter. We're sorry we can't personally answer every letter we receive, but we do use them in our research. Thanks for taking the time to keep in touch.

CONTACT US

WRITE to us at CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.

PHONE us on (02) 9577 3399.

FAX us on (02) 9577 3355.

EMAIL us at ausconsumer@choice.com.au.

WORLD WIDE WEB www.choice.com.au.

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The Australian Consumers' Association is a non-profit, non-party-political organisation, established in 1959 to provide consumers with information and advice on goods, services, health and personal finances, and to help maintain and enhance their quality of life. It's a Council member of Consumers International.

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We test and rate products and services. Our ratings are usually based on quality without regard to price, and are derived from lab tests, expert judgments and reader surveys. If a product is high in quality and relatively low in price, we deem it a **Best Buy**. A rating applies only to the brand and model tested, not to other models sold under the same brand name, unless so noted. Financial information in CHOICE is of a general nature, and is not intended to be advice on individual investments.

We represent and act in consumers' interests. We lobby and campaign on behalf of consumers to promote their rights, to influence government policy, and to ensure consumer issues have a high profile in the public arena.

Membership. Subscribers can become voting members of the Consumers' Association on application. Voting membership costs \$89.10 for a year, which covers your subscription to CHOICE with free access to CHOICE Online and a further subscription to our policy and campaigning magazine, *Consuming Interest*.

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REQUEST A TEST

If you've seen something you'd like us to test, email us at requestatest@choice.com.au or call us on (02) 9577 3399.

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Photo: Getty Images

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Women get wise about cars

There's more to cars than the colour and it doesn't cost hundreds of dollars to change a spark plug. But chances are when a woman walks into a car yard or a workshop, she'll be patronised with very little useful information about the car, while the mechanic will try to rip her off — or at least that's what a discussion paper on women consumers and the motor vehicle industry concludes.

Research shows that women are charged higher prices for goods and services, enduring inconvenience, negative treatment and outright humiliation in the process. Examples in the paper include:

- A woman who attempted to buy a car from a small-town dealership on four occasions was continually ignored by the sales rep, and finally told to go home and come back with her husband. She was a widow.
- A woman took her car in for its first service and was charged well above the industry price for genuine parts. That's bad enough, but they'd used non-genuine parts!

Don't get mad — get smart!

The NSW Department for Women, in conjunction with Toyota, the NRMA and Motor Vehicle Repairs Industry Council, has produced an information guide aimed particularly at women. The *Automotive Tool Kit* provides advice about buying a car, consumer rights, getting repairs or a service, getting to know your car, and even career opportunities in the industry.

It's biased towards NSW regulations and policy, particularly when it comes to buying a car and consumer rights, but there's still useful general information and resources for readers from all states.

The best way to get a copy of the kit is from the Internet, where you can link straight to all the relevant organisations and contacts: www.women.nsw.gov.au/mvip/mvip.html.

If you don't have access to the Net, there's a limited number of printed copies available. Phone the NSW Department for Women on (02) 9287 1860 (toll-free within NSW on 1800 817 227) for a copy.



MORE DISHWASHERS ON TEST

CHOICE's lab has just added another seven dishwasher results to those reported on in the May 2001 issue. The new models are (in rank order):

- AEG Öko Favorit 4070 (overall score 81%; \$1449).
- BENDIX DWN31 (76%; \$995).
- OMEGA DW2002 (76%; \$1390).
- SMEG SA622EB (75%; \$1034).
- FISHER & PAYKEL Dishdrawer DD603 (74%; \$1499).
- LG LD-12AW2 (71%; \$899).
- BLANCO BFDW670S (70%; \$1350).

These results mean the AEG Öko Favorit 6081-W (\$1678) from the May report remains the top performer with an overall score of 85%, and the FISHER & PAYKEL Nautilus 920 (\$949), WESTINGHOUSE Freestyle SB920WH (\$899) and DISHLEX Global DX300 (\$949) are still the overall Best Buys. Although the BENDIX has about the same purchase price and running costs as these three models, its ease of use score is comparatively low (the second-lowest in the test) at 63%.

All the new machines washed dishes well except the LG, which didn't clean cups and glasses well, particularly those in the corners of the basket. The BLANCO got a fairly low score for energy efficiency, which translates into comparatively high running costs. All the models are fairly easy to load and unload.

The F&P Dishdrawer, pictured, gives you extra versatility over a normal dishwasher. With its two completely independent drawers you can, say, fast-wash glasses and cutlery in one while stacking dirtier pots and plates in the other, or all sorts of other permutations. Its energy and water efficiency scores (63% and 67% respectively) pulled it down in the rankings, but if you don't suffer from a shortage of water its great

MONITORING YOUR BABY

If you're worried you won't hear your baby while you're out hanging up the washing, a baby monitor could give you peace of mind.

We tested 12 that consist of a parent and a baby unit — you plug in the transmitter in the baby's room and the receiver wherever you are in your home, or you can take the receiver running on batteries with you while you're moving around. Then you choose the same frequency for both units (you're given two to choose from in case of interference), switch them on, adjust the volume, and you can now hear your baby's cry and other sounds even through closed doors or out in the yard.

The distance over which they'll work depends on what's between the two units; the number and type of walls will make a difference, for example. Claims vary from around 50 to 100 m, and none of the models we tested failed the fairly stringent test we put them through.

We found three to recommend (prices are what we paid in June) pictured, right, clockwise from top:

- LINDAM Baby Talk Plus Monitor (\$110).
- LOVE N CARE Ultra-Lite Nursery Monitor (the Best Buy at \$80).
- PHILIPS Babysitter (\$100).

The LINDAM and LOVE N CARE both have a light that indicates noise if you'd rather see it than hear it (such as when you're watching TV or when you're vacuuming).



FISHER & PAYKEL

versatility might well outweigh its running costs, which are higher than the AEG and the Best Buys. Unfortunately it's pretty expensive.

For more information on the new models tested, go to www.choice.com.au and type 'dishwashers' in the search box.

HEALTH ALERTS AND FALSE ALARMS

Most women with email will have received one saying tampons contain asbestos (to induce heavier bleeding and therefore greater profits for manufacturers) and dioxins (a carcinogenic by-product of the bleaching process). The email's been circulating for many years, and has been investigated several times by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) and other health authorities worldwide.

The TGA says there's no evidence that tampons contain asbestos, and tests have found dioxin levels in them to be at or below the detectable limit of about one part in a trillion.

In recent months an email claiming antiperspirants are the "leading cause of breast cancer" has been doing the rounds. As you probably already suspect, it's all a load of nonsense: many extremely thorough epidemiological studies have failed to find that using antiperspirant is even a risk factor for developing breast cancer, let alone the leading cause of it.

These are but two of the many 'health alert' emails to be mass-circulated: there are similarly alarmist ones about sodium laureth sulphate in shampoo causing cancer; waterproof sunscreen causing blindness and that canola oil is toxic (we discussed this one in *Appetisers*, CHOICE, May 2001). They all contain scientific-sounding explanations to back up their claims and, on the whole, don't sound so far-fetched as to be untenable. But they're all total nonsense.

If you've received these emails, or ever get similar ones, you can check their validity on the following website: www.snopes.com (click on 'Toxin du jour'). This is one of many sites that collects 'urban legends' doing the rounds of the Internet. Health alerts are designated false, true or possibly true (not all health alerts are bogus) and the rationale for the decision is also explained. If you come across one that's not listed on this site, forward a copy to them and let them follow it up for you.

The Internet is a great way of getting information disseminated quickly and cheaply to a large audience. Unfortunately it can be abused, so if we use it we need to be vigilant.

The PHILIPS is the only monitor tested that works during a power failure: it has an automatic battery back-up that'll keep operating. It only disconnects the batteries when it receives power from the adaptor, while the other models disconnect them when the adaptor is plugged in and don't switch back to battery operation when the power's off.

If you can't find one of the top three, three other models worked almost as well: GENEXXA FM Cordless Room Monitor (\$105), GRACO Ultraclear Monitor (\$150) and TOMMEE TIPPEE Teddybear Soft-Light Nursery Monitor (\$88).

On the other hand, *don't* buy the FISHER-PRICE Super-Sensitive Nursery Monitor, KIDDICALL Baby Monitor or ROGER ARMSTRONG Clip & Go Light & Sound. In our test, the FISHER-PRICE and ROGER ARMSTRONG transmitted unacceptably loud background noise, and the KIDDICALL is voice-activated only and doesn't detect softer sounds — we think you need to be able to hear more than it lets you.

For more information on the tested models, go to www.choice.com.au and type 'baby monitors' in the search box. They'll also be in the forthcoming edition of *The CHOICE Guide to Baby Products*.



RHONDA THWAITES

CHOICE CUTS

CORRECTION

DVD PLAYERS

CHOICE, MAY 2001

On page 34 we showed a photo of the SONY DVP-S336's remote control with a photo of the YAMAHA DVD S796. This is what the YAMAHA's remote looks like.



High-tech battery — worth the extra money?

Some battery-operated electronic devices, such as camcorders and digital cameras, need a relatively high rate of energy, putting a high drain on the batteries. There are new batteries on the market that manufacturers claim meet this energy demand more efficiently and last longer. So we tested one — the **ENERGIZER e² Titanium Technology** — against its sibling, the **ENERGIZER Advanced Formula** standard alkaline to see if there really is a difference.

According to Energizer, the titanium compound in the cell “improves the internal efficiency of the battery, unlocking more power and run time in high-tech devices”.

We tested samples of the most common battery size (AA) in two standard scenarios and measured the time they lasted:

- One simulated the use in a low-drain appliance (such as a portable cassette player) for one hour a day. The **Titanium Technology** lasted only marginally longer than the standard **ENERGIZER**.
- The other simulated the use in a high-drain appliance (such as a camcorder or digital camera) under continuous discharge. The **Titanium Technology** lasted about 25% longer than the standard **ENERGIZER**.

If you shop around a bit, you should find a four-pack of the standard alkaline **Advanced Formula** batteries for around \$6–\$6.50, and a four-pack of **Titanium Technology** for about \$8–\$8.50 (based on a price survey in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth in March 2001). So if value for money is your main concern, stick with standard alkalines for most appliances.

In high-drain, high-tech appliances, you get very similar performance per dollar from both models. However, the **Titanium Technology** does last longer, so you don't have to change batteries as often — and you're less likely to be left without power, missing out on that particularly priceless photo.



UPDATE

DISHWASHERS

CHOICE MAY 2001

On page 41 we said no models in this test had a PC update feature. Miele has now told us the **MIELE G641SC** in the test does, as do all its models.



WORLD CONSUMER SNAPSHOT

SOCK MYSTERY SOLVED!

Ever wonder where missing socks go? Germany's consumer magazine *Test* reported in their March issue on a German professor's invention that could stop socks from going walkabout. The “snap socks” are held together by a press-stud so they stay paired in the washing machine (and on the line) — no more lost socks, and no sorting!

The socks are made of 98% cotton and 2% elastane, are available over the internet from www.snap-sock.de and cost DM51 (around \$45 Australian) for three pairs — or you can get some press-studs, or even a safety pin, and do it yourself.



GIZMOS GALORE!

Pro Teste from Portugal reported on a ‘House of the future’ in April, and, funnily enough, we think the article's still relevant. The house includes anti-flooding sensors, smart card readers, rubbish sorting and disposal units, and a host of programmable features including ovens, TVs, tubs and watering systems. It's an inspired start.

A minor hiccup... no such thing

April's issue of *Consumentengids* from the Netherlands suggests the following solutions for hiccups, all of which stimulate the back of the mouth and top of the throat: rub a finger on the back of your mouth, dissolve a teaspoon of sugar under your tongue, drink liquid with rapid successive swallows, gargle, swallow finely chopped ice, slowly eat dry bread or biscuits, induce sneezing (say, by smelling pepper), hold your breath or breathe in a paper bag, or breathe the deeply several times.

Nothing works? Well then, hold your tongue! Seriously, grip it between your thumb and index finger and gently tug. If you're still hiccuping after two days, though, see your GP.

THUMBS UP



■ Tom Agnew of
Croemer, NSW,

gives a big thumbs up to
Unique Vanities in
Salamander Bay, which
promptly honoured their
lifetime guarantee by
sending a serviceman to
remove and replace the
top of his cracked
bathroom vanity —
complete with free
plumbing replacements.

■ From Tom Colless of
Leura, NSW, thumbs up to
*Macarthur's Beta
Electrical*, who replaced a
faulty heater at no charge
although it wasn't still
under warranty.

■ Sue Beck gives a
thumbs up to *Angas Park
Pitted Prunes*, which sent
her a recipe booklet and
replacement for the pack
she'd found some mouldy
prunes in.

■ And Judy Turner
awards a thumbs up to
Kmart in Charlestown,
NSW — the store manager
phoned to acknowledge
her complaint about large,
difficult-to-remove labels,
and said he'd follow up
the issue.

Monique Brunello
Via Internet.

Flu shots

I currently suffer from severe
asthma and as you pointed out
national health guidelines
recommend I have an annual shot
but I am not under the
Commonwealth government's
immunisation scheme.

When I asked my doctor and
pharmacist about the reduced
cost for the vaccine for a patient
with such a condition neither had
heard of this.

I called the hotline and was
told that it's a restricted benefit
on the pharmaceutical benefits
list and that the doctor must tick a
box on the prescription which
indicates a patient is at increased
risk of infection of the lower
respiratory tract. This would alert
the pharmacist to charge the
lower rate.

Incidentally I was told you gave
the incorrect cost (instead of
\$17.47 it's actually \$18.44). Too
late for me as I've already had the
jab but I'm sending a copy of my
article and the information I
received from the hotline to both
my doctor and pharmacist and
hope it will benefit others with
chronic conditions in my local
community.

Many thanks for the article and
continued role as consumer
advocate.

*Thanks Monique for passing this
information on. A pregnant
woman also told us her doctor
didn't realise she was entitled to a
flu shot and charged her \$20.*

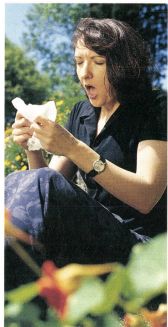
*So to clear things up, we went
back to the Federal Department
of Health and Aged Care to clarify
the price structure so we could
correct any mistakes in our
original article.*

*The department told us that
our original information was
correct except that the dispensed
price was \$17.57 not \$17.47. They
still didn't explain why Monique
was charged \$18.44 when she's in
a high risk group. Our further
inquiries reveal that the pricing
structure is very complex. So, to
set the record straight, this is what
the department told us:*

■ All doctors and immunisation
providers have been informed
about eligibility requirements and
the cost of the 2001 flu
vaccinations. All doctors have
been supplied with the most
recent immunisation handbook
and pharmacists should have a
copy of the latest schedule.

■ You only qualify for a free shot
if you're over 65 (or over 50 if you
are an Aboriginal or Torres Strait
Islander) or if you are an
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander
between the ages of 15 and 49
with a chronic condition.

■ Your GP can only give you a



RHONDA THRENT

shot on the spot if you're eligible
for a free vaccination.

■ If you're not in this group, you
can only get a flu shot on the PBS
if your doctor assesses that you're
eligible using the national
guidelines (see *Choice Cuts*,
May 2001) and writes a PBS
prescription which you take to
your pharmacist.

■ If you're eligible for a PBS
prescription it'll cost up to \$21.90
(depending upon the pharmacist)
unless you're entitled to a
concession. On top of the
dispensed cost of \$17.57 you'll pay
a safety net recording cost of
\$0.87 (which comes to \$18.44 —
what Monique paid) and you may
also be charged an additional
pharmacy charge of up to \$2.69.

■ If you're entitled to a
concession, you'll pay \$3.50
unless you or your family have
spent \$182 on the PBS in the last
year in which case the shot is free.

■ If you aren't eligible under the
national guidelines but still want
to have a flu shot, your doctor can
write a private prescription but it
won't be covered by the PBS. The
cost will depend upon the
pharmacist (not up to \$21.90 as
we reported).

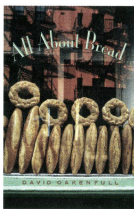
If you have any problems call
the immunisation hotline on:
1 800 671 811.

LETTER OF THE MONTH

We want to hear from you — your experiences help our research and often
let other readers know about scams and rip-offs. To thank you for writing to
us, *Your Letters* awards a prize of a CHOICE book to the 'Letter of the month'.
This month's winner, Monique Brunello, of Sydney, New South Wales,
receives *All About Bread*, or any other book of her choice from Consumer
Bookshelf, pages 30 to 32.

We're sorry we don't have the resources to answer all your letters
personally, and in the magazine we may edit them or print only an extract.
See page 2 for how to reach us.

And keep your letters and emails coming about positive outcomes
following your complaint to a retailer, manufacturer or tradesperson (see
last month's CHOICE). Address your letters to 'Thumbs up' at the address
published on page 2.



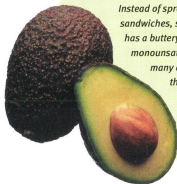
All about rice

There are more rices than you can poke a stick at these days. Here's a helpful guide to each type.

- **Long-grain white:** Versatile, all-purpose rice, four or five times as long as its width, with a firm, fluffy texture that separates well when cooked. Good for fried rice, stir-fries, curries and rice salads.
- **Long-grain brown:** Versatile and nutritious, with a nutty flavour and slight chewy texture. It's fluffy and separates well when cooked. Good for savoury dishes such as salads, curries and pilafs, as well as sweet dishes.
- **Easy-cook/rice that 'cooks in the fridge':** parboiled: Broken grains (called 'rough' or 'paddy' rice) are soaked, partially steamed or boiled, then dried (turning them light yellow) so that when covered with hot tap water and left to stand for an hour, they re-hydrate.
- **Short/medium white (short-grain is nearly round):** Both have a soft creamy texture when cooked that takes subtle flavours and colours well, whether sweet, spicy or savoury, served hot or cold. Good for main meals, salads and side dishes, and ideal for desserts.
- **Short/medium brown:** Nutritious, with a nutty flavour and a slightly chewy texture. Good particularly in poultry stuffing, rissoles, stuffed capsicums and soups.
- **Arborio/Italian risotto:** A medium-grain white rice with a pearly sheen, it swells and absorbs large amounts of liquid while remaining 'al dente' (firm but cooked). Good for risotto, paella and other Mediterranean rice dishes.
- **Basmati:** Aromatic long-grain white rice with dry, separate grains when cooked. Good for Indian and Middle Eastern dishes.
- **Glutinous rice (also called 'sticky' or 'pudding' rice):** Fat, opaque white grains (or sometimes coloured), which get sweet and sticky on boiling. Good for desserts, baking and confectionary, and when making beer, wine and rice paper.
- **Jasmine:** Subtle-flavoured, fragrant long-grain white rice. Its natural moisture makes it soft and fluffy when cooked; best cooked without salt. Good for Thai, Vietnamese and Chinese cooking.
- **Wild rice (tuscaraora):** It's actually an aquatic grass. It has black to brown grains, a chewy texture and nutty flavour, needs to be washed before use and is often mixed with other kinds of rice because it's expensive. Serve it flavoured with sautéed onions, mushrooms or nuts, as an accompaniment, or in soups and salads.

BETTER THAN BUTTER

Instead of spreading butter or margarine on your sandwiches, substitute it with thinly spread avocado. It has a buttery taste, and although 23% fat, it's mostly monounsaturated or 'good' fat, as well as having many other valuable vitamins and minerals. And that's still much less fat than butter or margarine spreads — the lowest spread on the market has 40% fat; and most are in the 60–75% range.



Can liquorice increase your blood pressure?

Unfortunately for liquorice lovers, the answer is yes.

We've known for some time that excessive consumption of liquorice can increase blood pressure, but recent research indicates that there's also a link between eating only moderate amounts and an increase in blood pressure. One study found that eating even as little as 50 g a day can have an effect on some people. It's caused by a plant acid present in liquorice which can lower the potassium content of the blood, increasing sodium and fluid retention and high blood pressure.

There's nothing wrong with indulging in liquorice every now and then, and the effect that it has on blood pressure can vary with each individual. If you have a high blood pressure problem you should consult with your GP or a dietitian. If you eat liquorice on a daily or regular basis, and you haven't had your blood pressure checked for a while you should do so, and buy brands that are low in salt.



VANESSA MARSHALL



VANESSA MARSHALL

Frosty bugs

Never defrost frozen food at room temperature unless you want to risk a dose of food poisoning. Thaw it slowly in the fridge or defrost it in the microwave. If you use the microwave, however, make sure you plan on cooking the food straight away, otherwise it could be at the perfect temperature for bugs to grow. Remember, different foods defrost at different rates so consult your microwave's instructions for defrosting specific foods.

Pâté

Pâté may be just the thing for your party. The problem is, it's a party for bugs as well — bacteria just love it.

So if bacteria love pâté, is it safe to eat? We checked 139 samples of both prepackaged and unpackaged pâté from delicatessens and supermarkets for overall bacteria levels as well as certain food-poisoning bacteria.

WHAT'S IN PÂTÉ?

Pâté is a fine paste, usually based on liver (the ones we tested were mainly made from chicken liver) and sometimes other meats or fish, and flavoured with herbs, spices, wine, spirits or liqueurs.

As well as the basic ingredients, commercial pâtés usually contain a number of additives. Most have one or more preservatives in them — usually sodium nitrite to stop bacteria growing and maintain the pink colour; and sometimes sodium metabisulphite (223). Some asthma sufferers are sensitive to sulphites.

Gelatin and vegetable gums are also added to thicken, emulsify and gel the product. Various

starches or flour are also added to thicken and hold water.

The label on MARGARET'S KITCHEN pâté claims it's preservative-free, but the ingredients list shows sodium nitrite, which is a curing agent for meat but also a preservative.

WHY DO BUGS LIKE PÂTÉ?

Bacteria love moist high-protein foods such as liver and other meats that form the basis of many pâtés (and all the ones we tested).

The liver and other meats are sometimes only partially cooked, and often early on in the process before any coatings and decorations are added and before it goes in the container, leaving plenty of scope for bacterial contamination and growth. Some brands are cooked in the container at the end rather than earlier on, which some manufacturers say is superior for food safety.

In addition, the mincing process exposes a large surface area for any bacteria present to spread and multiply.

IN A NUTSHELL

■ **Results** of our snapshot survey found that delis in the major supermarkets keep their unpackaged pâté better than independent delis we looked at. We rated one third of our independent deli samples as unacceptable, meaning they're already close to being 'off'.

■ **We found** *Listeria monocytogenes* in a small number of samples, so if you're in an 'at risk' group you should still avoid all pâté (see The problem with listeria, page 10, for more on this).

PHOTOS: WARESSA HARRSHALL

OUR TEST RESULTS

For a summary of results see the table and table notes.

Unpackaged

We found *Listeria* species in five out of 73 samples of unpackaged pâté ('unpackaged' meaning either cut directly from a block or cut and prewrapped in cling wrap — the type you buy from the deli section at supermarkets or in independent delis).

Three were *Listeria monocytogenes*. This is why people in 'at risk' groups should still avoid all pâté (see *The problem with listeria* for more on this).

E. coli was found in two samples, most likely indicating a handling problem. Some strains of *E. coli* can cause food poisoning, but while most are harmless, the presence of *E. coli* in food is an indication of faecal contamination and the possibility of the presence of far worse bacteria that could cause serious illness (see *Safety*, far right, for more on this). Both were then tested for salmonella but luckily it wasn't found (see *Salmonella*, far right, for more).

Results of our snapshot survey found you've more chance of buying pâté with high numbers of bacteria (and hence closer to being 'off') from the delis we looked at rather than from a Coles or Woolies supermarket. We rated one third of samples from delis as unacceptable.

In terms of quality, the unpackaged pâté from supermarket delis had similar overall levels of bacteria to the branded, packaged pâté.

Packaged

There's been a vast improvement in bacterial quality since our last test of prepackaged pâté in 1994. This time, seven of the 11 brands on test were problem-free, whereas last time only three of the 10 brands tested were.

The bug problem is almost entirely one of quality (see *Quality*, far right, for what this means) as opposed to safety. MARGARET'S KITCHEN was the worst brand on test for quality, with four of the six samples having very high levels of bacteria.

WHAT THE MANUFACTURERS SAID

We sent our test results to manufacturers to give them the opportunity to respond. Where their samples had high bacteria levels they were naturally very concerned. All of them follow strict quality assurance procedures and conduct microbiological analysis, and say they never get levels of bacteria as high as we found.

If, as manufacturers say, the product is fine leaving the factory, then distributors and retailers must share the blame. Poor storage or handling temperatures enable bacteria to multiply fast. CHOICE's advice to manufacturers is to routinely check how their product is handled all the way down the line to its display in the store. We also think health departments should be doing more checks of retail refrigeration temperatures, and that retailers should be required by law to have a proper food safety program in place that covers fridge temperature monitoring and recording.



What we tested

UNPACKAGED

In Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney we bought pâté from the deli section of the two major supermarket chains (COLES and WOOLWORTHS/SAFEWAY), as well as from 10 independent delis in each city.

The pâté was either cut directly from a block or was prewrapped in cling wrap. When available we bought chicken liver-based pâté in one of the available flavours.

PACKAGED

You'll find packaged pâté in the refrigerator section of supermarkets. It's usually in single-serve plastic containers prepacked by the manufacturer.

In Sydney, we bought widely available brands: six samples of each from six different retail outlets. See the table for the brands included.

It's not just the manufacturer who determines the quality of a product you buy — the distributor and retailer play a large part as well. Not storing the product at the right temperature can reduce its life. Buying the samples from six different outlets gives a greater chance of the 'average' result being representative of the brand rather than of the storage conditions or handling at retail level (though it still can't take transport and warehouse storage into account).

THE PROBLEM WITH LISTERIA

How does it end up in our food?

Listeria can be found in soil, sewage, rivers, vegetables, insects, humans and animals, food-manufacturing premises and kitchens. Unlike most other food-poisoning bacteria, it can grow at refrigeration temperatures (below 5°C), making it a real nuisance. There are stringent manufacturing processes to control it, but our results show that it's not fully controlled in the pâté industry. *Listeria monocytogenes* is the potentially dangerous type.

Who's at risk?

- Pregnant women and their unborn children.
- Very young children.
- Elderly people.
- People whose immune systems are weak — for example, people with cancer, transplant recipients, people with alcohol dependency and those who are HIV-positive or have AIDS.



		1 QUALITY		2 SAFETY	
Type / brand	Number of samples	Borderline	Unacceptable	Borderline	Unacceptable
UNPACKAGED (A)					
COLES	23	1	4	0	0
WOOLWORTHS / SAFEWAY	20	0	0	2 (B)	1 (E)
Delicatessens	30	2	11	1 (C)	3 (F)
PACKAGED (in alphabetical order)					
COPPERPOT	6	0	0	0	0
COPPERPOT My Everyday Pâté	6	1	0	0	0
DON DELI SUPREME	6	0	0	0	0
JEAN PIERRE	6	1	1	0	0
MAGGIE BEER Pheasant Farm	6	0	0	0	0
MARGARET'S KITCHEN	6	0	4	0	0
REGAL	6	0	0	0	0
RONDA	6	0	0	0	0
RUBENS	6	0	0	0	0
SOUTH CAPE	6	0	0	0	0
TASMANIAN PÂTÉ	6	0	1	(D)	0

What's the effect?

Listeria monocytogenes infection can cause anything from fever, headaches, nausea and vomiting to meningitis and miscarriage.

What food should you avoid if you're in an at-risk group?

- Chilled precooked fish, seafood and meats (such as cold cuts, cold chicken, sliced meats) as well as salami and pâté.
- Uncooked seafood, smoked mussels and smoked salmon.
- Soft cheeses (such as camembert and brie), unpasteurised milk, soft-serve ice cream).
- Salads that have been prepared more than 12 hours in advance (make sure you carefully wash all raw vegetables).

1 Quality

Large numbers of bacteria indicate poor quality — food's been handled unhygienically somewhere along the way from manufacturer to retailer, subjected to temperature abuse (for example, not refrigerated properly during distribution and/or retail display) or is just plain old. A high standard plate count (SPC — a count of all the bacteria present in the food) means a food is close to going off or may already be off, depending on the numbers. We rated samples for quality as follows: **Borderline:** SPC 10^4 – 10^7 per gram of pâté (10^6 is a million).

Unacceptable: SPC more than 10^7 per gram of pâté.

2 Safety

Certain bacteria (called pathogens) can cause food poisoning or other diseases. We tested for the following:

■ **E. coli:** Indicates faecal contamination (usually due to poor personal hygiene — food handlers not washing their hands after going to the toilet, for example). While its presence mightn't make you sick, high levels mean a breakdown in hygiene practices and may indicate the presence of other pathogens (like salmonella and shigella, which are found in the gut of animals and humans along with *E. coli*). We rated *E. coli* as follows: **Borderline:** 10–70 *E. coli* per gram of pâté. **Unacceptable** (potential health hazard): More than 70 *E. coli* per gram of pâté.

■ **Listeria species:** Its presence is most likely to be due to contaminated ingredients or equipment, or inadequate cooking. The presence of a certain type — *Listeria monocytogenes* — is particularly serious (see *The problem with listeria* for more). We rated listeria as follows: **Borderline:** Presence of listeria species other than *L. monocytogenes* in 25 grams of pâté. **Unacceptable** (potential health hazard): Presence of *L. monocytogenes* in 25 grams of pâté.

■ **Salmonella:** Food-poisoning bacteria most commonly found in raw poultry and meat and unpasteurised or inadequately pasteurised dairy products. We only tested for salmonella if *E. coli* was found in a sample, because its presence means conditions are ripe for salmonella to be there too. Any salmonella in a sample would be unacceptable, but fortunately we didn't find it.

- (A) Either cut off the block or wrapped in cling wrap. Purchased from the deli section of a supermarket or from an independent delicatessen.
- (B) *Listeria* species, but not *L. monocytogenes*.
- (C) *E. coli*.
- (D) The same sample that had a high SPC also contained *Listeria* species, but not *L. monocytogenes*.
- (E) *L. monocytogenes*.
- (F) One sample unacceptable due to presence of *E. coli*, two samples unacceptable due to presence of *L. monocytogenes*.

1

'GROWING PAINS' ARE CAUSED BY GROWING

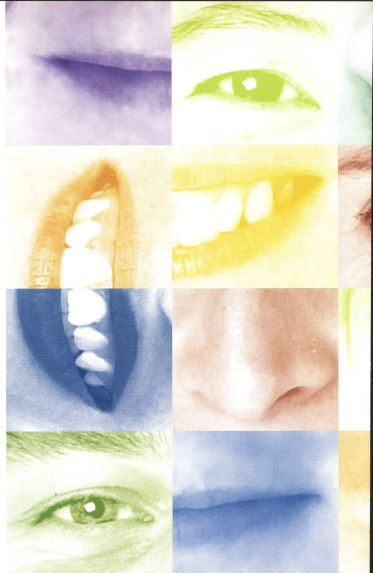
'Growing pains' is a label given to everything from irrational behaviour to an American sitcom, but when it's applied to childhood leg pains, is it real or a misnomer?

Many paediatricians say they often see children with pain in their legs that follows a consistent pattern. It's most common in three- to six-year-olds who wake up in the night screaming of pain in the ankles or shins. Ten-year-olds can have pain around the heel (Sever's disease), and 13- to 14-year-olds around the front of the knee (Osgood-Schlatter's disease).

But are these pains caused by growing? Some experts say yes, others say that the condition is a 'ragbag' of symptoms and the term 'growing pains' should be "slashed out of the dictionary".

Supporters of the theory say it happens when the long bones in the legs grow, stretching the slower-growing muscles and putting pressure on the part of the bone the muscles are attached to. Critics say it's caused by excessive exercise, not growing per se, and occurs in children who exercise beyond their physical ability.

While the origin of the pain is hotly disputed, experts agree the pain is real. They recommend treating it in young children with massage, warmth and painkillers, and with rest and muscle stretches for older children.



Folklore or FACT?

The truth behind 10 common health beliefs.

2

EATING CARROTS WILL IMPROVE YOUR EYESIGHT

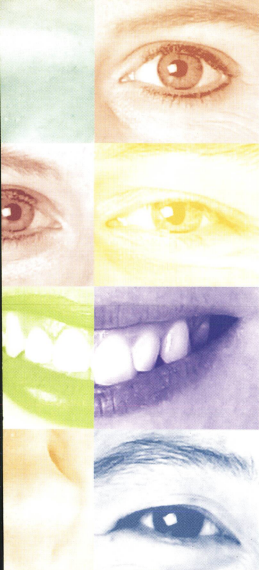
The Royal Air Force started this rumour to cover up its use of night radar during WWII. While carrots are a source of beta-carotene, which is necessary for good eyesight (the liver changes it into vitamin A), chomping on lots of carrots won't improve your vision.

A couple of years ago a major Australian eye study found that there was a tendency for people to begin eating lots of carrots at the first hint of night-blindness. Many women in the study had a diet that was above average in beta-carotene, but very bland: other sources of beta-carotene, such as green leafy, yellow, orange or red veges, weren't in their diets. While the

carrots and other veges are good for you, they won't make you see better in the dark unless you are severely deficient — which is highly unlikely in Australia as vitamin A is in a wide variety of the foods in our diet.

The night-blindness experienced by the people in the study is more likely to come from cataracts and other age-related eye problems.

Other studies draw mixed conclusions. Some suggest that eating green leafy vegetables and other sources of beta carotene (not just carrots) may help reduce the early signs of age-related problems. However, recent research based on the Australian eye study has found no association between eating more antioxidants (including vitamin A) and reducing age-related eye problems.



PHOTOS: VANESSA MARSHALL

HEART DISEASE IS JUST A MAN'S DISEASE

It's true that heart disease is the leading killer of Australian men but it's also the biggest killer of women, though many women are more concerned about breast cancer. However, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) statistics show that in 1998 more than 12,000 women died of heart disease compared to 2500 from breast cancer.

Women tend to develop heart disease about 10 years later than men (thanks to the protective effect of oestrogen), but generally they fare worse from heart attacks because the symptoms — tightness in the chest, nausea, dizziness, breathlessness, intense perspiration, a fluttering in the heart, and 'fullness' in the chest — are often passed off as indigestion, food poisoning or the onset of the flu. Failure to identify the symptoms both by doctors and women themselves means women are often treated later for heart disease, have less cardiac surgery and have poorer outcomes.

While a NSW Health survey found more women than men took blood pressure medication and were slightly more likely to take cholesterol lowering drugs or follow a diet it seems that many women with heart disease still don't heed the warnings. A recent small survey of the health beliefs of middle-aged Australian women diagnosed with heart disease by Dr Marilyn Guillemain from Melbourne University found that very few of the women interviewed thought they were at risk of getting heart disease, even though they had two or more risk factors including a strong family history, and didn't think it was relevant to their lives at that time.

THE BEST WAY TO CONTROL DIABETES IS TO AVOID SUGARY FOODS

What we know about diabetes and food has changed considerably.

It's the seventh leading cause of death in Australia, and occurs when the pancreas doesn't produce enough insulin or the insulin doesn't work properly to help the body use glucose, resulting in a build-up of glucose in the blood.

There are two main types:

- Type 1 diabetes, which mainly starts in childhood and is not caused by diet or lifestyle
- Type 2 diabetes, which usually occurs in adults and is made worse by an unhealthy diet and lack of exercise.

People with diabetes used to be advised not to eat sugar or sweet fruit or vegetables that contain large amounts of starch and sugar, based on the assumption that if you cut sugar out of your diet, your blood sugar levels will drop. But it's more complex than that.

Some foods are digested and release glucose into the blood stream faster than others. Foods that are digested quickly and provide a rapid rise in blood glucose have a high glycaemic index (GI). Foods with a low GI, such as wholegrain bread, some cereals such as porridge, pasta, fruit like apples and oranges, and starchy vegetables such as sweet potato and corn raise the blood sugar level slowly, helping with glucose control.

According to nutrition experts, the best advice for someone with diabetes is to base your diet on a variety of foods that are:

- Low in fat, especially saturated fat.
- High in fibre.
- Have a low GI.

Sugar's not a no-no; some sugar can help you stick to a healthy eating plan. But the key is to limit sugary foods with a high GI or a low nutritional value, such as lollies and soft drink.

YOU WON'T GET BITTEN BY MOSQUITOES IF YOU HAVE LOTS OF VITAMIN B IN YOUR BLOOD

Will a diet high in vitamin B protect you against mosquito bites? Not a shred of evidence supports this myth.

We could find only one study that looks at the possibility of vitamin B in the diet and mosquito immunity — and it found no mosquito immunity.

Mozzie experts say mosquitoes are attracted to our body odour, skin temperature, the amount of carbon dioxide we excrete and chemicals produced by microbes on our skin. If there are enough mosquitoes around, such as if you live near a swamp, anyone will be bitten. But if there aren't so many, they may be choosier.

Experts from the Queensland Institute of Medical Research believe that whether or not you're a tasty meal option comes down to genetics. Factors that make you attractive to mosquitoes — being big-boned, heavy, sweating a lot, not having much hair, and how much you react to mosquito bites — may be genetically determined, based on recent comparisons between identical and non-identical twins' perceptions of mosquito bites.

Mozzies carry some serious bloodborne infections, so it's best to avoid them by using repellents or physical barriers and ensuring there are no uncovered sources of water for them to breed in. Talk to your doctor if you are about to travel to an area known to have mosquito-borne diseases.

DRINKING CRANBERRY JUICE PREVENTS URINARY TRACT INFECTIONS

Cranberry juice is in vogue right now, thanks to those *Sex and the City* girls, but when it comes to the tart berry's role in preventing urinary tract infections, don't believe all the hype.

The theory is that cranberry juice contains ingredients that either make urine really acidic or stop bacteria from sticking to the wall of your bladder. While studies have shown that cranberry juice doesn't change your urine's acid levels long enough to make a difference, some ingredients found only in cranberries and blueberries could theoretically stop bacteria from sticking.

However, a review of the research into this issue found that all the studies are flawed and concludes that there's no evidence to prove cranberry juice or products can prevent or treat a urinary tract infection.

If you have one, drinking lots of any fluid will help to flush the bacteria out, and you may need to talk to your doctor about taking antibiotics.

WOMEN WHO HAVE CAESAREAN SECTIONS WON'T BECOME INCONTINENT

According to AIHW statistics, around 20% of all births in Australia are caesarean sections. Preventing later incontinence isn't the major reason women have a caesarean, but there's an unproven belief that it may protect against it in the long-term. As with most unproven theories, the medical community is divided. Those who disagree say the effects of the pregnancy hormone relaxin are the cause, not the type of delivery.

A study of women in New Zealand found that women who had a caesarean were less likely to have urinary incontinence three months after delivery than women who had a vaginal delivery with or without forceps. Another study in Sweden found that women who'd had a vaginal birth without instruments were more likely to have surgery for incontinence.

But a recent large South Australian study concluded that if you have a caesarean you're less likely to have a prolapse, stretched vagina and bladder repairs later in life but it won't protect you against most forms of incontinence, especially anal incontinence, and haemorrhoids.

Obstetricians say it's difficult to conclusively prove whether the style of birth or the pregnancy hormones contribute to incontinence without further long-term research. Nevertheless, it's a fact that about 51% of women suffer from some form of incontinence by the time they're 70; that women who don't have children are four times more likely than men to have stress incontinence; and that the rate of incontinence increases after the first child.

Ways of protecting against incontinence include regular pelvic floor exercises, particularly after you've had the baby, controlling your weight, and avoiding activities like smoking that make coughing worse.



8 TAKING VITAMIN C IN LARGE AMOUNTS WILL STOP YOU CATCHING A COLD

How many times have you reached for the vitamin C at the hint of a sniffle? Some people swear by high doses of vitamin C (up to 20,000 mg a day). The bad news is that it won't stop you catching a cold, but it might help reduce the cold's severity once you have it. There's not enough evidence to be conclusive. Colds are caused by viruses and are spread by water droplets in the air.

As vitamin C is widely available, cheap and non-toxic in normal doses, it's worth a go, but the best remedy is to ride the cold out: rest, drink lots of fluids, eat regularly and treat the individual symptoms — paracetamol for pain, inflammation and fever, decongestants for a blocked nose and cough suppressants for a dry hacking cough that produces no phlegm.

9 SUNSCREEN PREVENTS MELANOMA

In a nutshell: no, not on its own.

Sunscreen's a very important part of skin cancer prevention, but only a part. You should also:

- Wear protective clothing, including a hat.
- Avoid midday sun in particular.
- Avoid binge-sunning — people who spend a lot of time indoors with short periods in intense sunlight are more likely to get melanomas than outdoor workers who are exposed to sun over the long term.

When you're in the sun, you're exposed to two forms of ultraviolet radiation: UVA and UVB. UVB causes sunburn, and a sunscreen's SPF (sun protection factor) rating is based on protection against sunburn. But now there's evidence that UVA and visible light — which were thought to be relatively harmless — also contribute to skin damage, and increase the risk of developing skin cancers, especially melanoma.

Until a few years ago, many sunscreens blocked mainly UVB radiation. Now virtually all are 'broad-spectrum' to cover other types of radiation. However, while those with an SPF of 30+ provide up to 97% UVB protection and some shortwave UVA radiation, no sunscreen provides complete protection against long-wavelength UVA radiation and visible sunlight.

Scale-like carcinomas on the skin's surface are mainly UVB-related. UVA radiation and visible sunlight reaches deeper into the skin, affecting the cells that produce melanin and the immune system and producing melanomas.

Some studies suggest that if you rely on sunscreens and spend more time in the sun as a result, you're more at risk of developing melanomas. But critics argue that melanomas take 10–50 years to appear and there's not enough conclusive data yet to show how much protection against melanomas newer broad-spectrum sunscreens provide.

10 TIGHT UNDIES CAN MAKE YOU INFERTILE

Should men be concerned about wearing tight-fitting undies or jeans? Maybe, maybe not. And the debate about whether or not sperm counts are falling isn't clear-cut either.

The best temperature for sperm production is 35°C — 2°C below core body temperature — and it's widely accepted by experts that a rise in scrotal temperature, seen mainly in studies of boys and men with undescended testes, can affect sperm quality.

Some studies suggest that wearing tight underwear does raise the scrotal temperature and affect sperm quality. One even suggests it might be an effective contraceptive — although we wouldn't recommend it. But some experts are sceptical. They say there's a range of other factors that affect sperm quality and men "don't wear underwear that tight" 24 hours a day.

The good news for jocks fans is that even if wearing tight underwear did have any impact on sperm quality, it would only be temporary. If you're concerned about your sperm count, switching to boxers might help, but there's no guarantee.

Tantalising TALONS

Bright, bold nail polish certainly packs a girl-power punch, but chips and scuffs ruin the image. Which brands zing for longer?

IN A NUTSHELL

- The best of 15 popular brands of nail polish still looked good after five days of normal wear and tear.
- You can buy a good nail polish for around \$10 or less. The most expensive polish we tested came out near the top — and so did the cheapest.

WHAT TO BUY

REVLON	\$10.95
AUSTRALIS	\$6.50
BOURJOIS Shock resistant	\$9.31
CHANEL Le Vernis	\$36.29
COVERGIRL Nail slicks	\$6.71

Back in the old days, evolutionarily speaking, fingernails were an important weapon for women. Thus a popular theory about the purpose of nail polish is that it emphasises a woman's weaponry. Take Cleopatra, for example: the renowned warrior queen (and international seductress...) coloured her nails red.

Weapons aside, we're really interested in whether there's much difference among the multitude of brands of nail polish on the market. We recruited 29 wannabe war queens to test 15 popular brands, and rate them on how easy they were to apply, how good they looked and how long they lasted (see *What we rated*, far right, for details). And the colour we gave them? Deep crimson, of

course, today's *couleur de rigueur* for warrior princess weaponry.

While most brands looked pretty good initially, some looked a lot better than others after a few days' wear. Usually, though, you can expect a polish to look good for two days before you notice dulling, chipping or scuffing.

A couple of the polishes — **CLARINS** and **YSL** — recommend using a top and base coat. We tried them both with and without, and found that using them helped the polish last — but added to the cost and application time. Overall, they weren't any better than the **REVLON**, which lasted just as long without the need for a top or base coat, and at a much cheaper price.

Profiles

The recommended polishes are profiled in rank then alphabetical order and include trialists' assessment and some comments. The maximum possible rating was five stars. The prices given are the prices we paid in November 2000.

REVLON

Price: \$10.95

Initial appearance: ★★★★★

Appearance after five days: ★★★★★

General comments: Good coverage and equal best lasting power (best of the polish-only applications) — it still looked good on the fifth day.

Trialists comments:

"Stayed shiny the whole week."

"Keeps its colour, depth and density really well."



AUSTRALIS

Price: \$6.50

Initial appearance: ★★★★★

Appearance after five days: ★★★★★

General comments: Good overall, but didn't last as long as most others in the *What to buy* list.

Trialists comments:

"Even colour and didn't get too dull."

"Went on very well, colour was even but too much chipping."

"Looked great for about three days."



BOURJOIS SHOCK RESISTANT

Price: \$9.31

Initial appearance: ★★★★★

Appearance after five days: ★★★★★

General comments: Good overall, but didn't last as long as most others in the *What to buy* list.

Trialists comments:

"It covered well with two coats and looked good."

"Overall quite good for two to three days, then it was time to remove it."



CHANEL LE VERNIS

Price: \$36.29

Initial appearance: ★★★★★

Appearance after five days: ★★★★★

General comments: Good coverage and lasting power.

Trialists comments:

"Strong colour and even thickness."

"Went on well and stayed in good condition for five days."

"Very hard to take off — discoloured fingers and nails."





CLIPPINGS

■ Nail polish dates back to 3000 BC, when the Chinese developed protective nail polishes and lacquers. Gum arabic, egg white, gelatine, bee's wax and vegetable dyes were used to create a protective as well as ornamental coating for nails.

■ Today's nail polish is basically glorified car enamel — both are based on the chemical nitrocellulose (which was also originally used as an explosive!). In fact, you could use nail polish to touch up the dings on your duco — as long as your car is fire engine red or a fetching shade of fuchsia.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

The products in the *What to buy* list rated 'good' overall. Other products we tested rated as follows:

BRANDS RATED 'OK' OVERALL:

- AVON Colour Last Plus (\$10.95).
- CHRISTIAN DIOR Vernis Diorific (\$35).
- CLARINS Le Vernis (without top/base coat; \$23).
- INNOXA Express (\$9.90).
- MAYBELLINE Express Finish Fast Dry (\$7.35).
- NAPOLEON (\$9.75).

These products tended not to look as good on day five as the brands in the *What to buy* list, or there were other problems, including being difficult to apply (CHRISTIAN DIOR, because the applicator is hard to grip); having uneven coverage (MAYBELLINE); being slightly too runny (AVON, CLARINS and NAPOLEON) or a bit sluggish (INNOXA).

BRANDS RATED 'BORDERLINE' OVERALL:

- MAC (\$18).
- MAX FACTOR Diamond Hard (\$9.35).
- NUTRIMETICS Reflect (\$15.30).
- YSL Pure colour lacquer (without top/base coat; \$33).

These products showed at least some signs of chipping, scuffing and dulling by day three of the test. MAX FACTOR also suffered from other problems, namely uneven colour and being too runny.

COVERGIRL NAIL SLICKS

Price: \$6.71

Initial appearance: ★★★★★

Appearance after five days: ★★

General comments: Didn't look as good as some others at first, but had lasting power.

Trialists comments:

"Very little chipping, slight scuffing, easy to apply, smooth and good colour."



The following two nail polishes were rated as highly as those in the *What to buy* list only when used with the recommended additional top and base coats, which makes them more expensive, time-consuming and fiddly.

CLARINS LE VERNIS

Plus oo base/top coat

Price: \$46 (\$23 for each product)

Initial appearance: ★★★★★

Appearance after five days: ★★★★★

General comments: Looked good initially and had the equal best lasting power, but takes longer to apply because of the extra coats required. Without the base and top coat, it didn't last nearly as long.

Trialists comments:

"I loved this polish even though it took a little longer to apply because of the base and top coats."

"Dulling due to scratches caused by the time taken to harden."

"The signs of wear are quite minor, although some chipping is noticeable."

YSL

Plus Protective Smoothing base coat and Lasting Sheen top coat

Price: \$99 (\$33 for each product)

Initial appearance: ★★★★★

Appearance after five days: ★★

General comments: Looked good initially and had good lasting power, but takes longer to apply because of the extra coats required. Without the base and top coat, it didn't last nearly as long.

Trialists comments:

"I gardened without gloves and this polish never chipped or dulled."

"I kept smudging the polish waiting for each coat to dry — too fiddly for me."

WHAT WE RATED

Each trialist tested six polishes and rated them on the following criteria:

- **Application:**
 - Smooth consistency, not sluggish or runny.
 - Spreads easily on nails.
 - Applicator easy to use.
 - Even coverage.
 - Opacity.
 - Overall initial appearance.
- **Wear and tear over five days:**
 - Signs of dulling (rated each day).
 - Chipping (rated each day).
 - Wearing away or scuffing (rated each day).
 - Overall appearance on day five.
- **Likelihood of buying the product.**
- **Overall rating.**

TABLETS in your wash

They're pre-measured for convenience, and wash at least as well as the equivalent powders and concentrates.

IN A NUTSHELL

■ **WHITE TULIP** tablets for a front loader give a good wash at a very competitive price, but they're not so good for top loaders. You'll be paying more per wash for the best results in a top loader.

Laundry tablets and sachets are relatively new on the market — they're pre-measured amounts of detergent, packaged so they're ready to pop in with the washing and there's no mess (well, relatively little mess — both **WHITE TULIP** kinds crumbled so easily they had to be put straight into the machine).

We tested five currently on the market and ranked them on washing performance — checking them against the powder and/or concentrate of the same brand if there was one (there was no equivalent **WHITE TULIP** powder or concentrate). We also worked out the cost per wash for each, based on the cost of the packet and the dose recommended by the manufacturer.

Laundry tablets/sachets are convenient, but if you regularly wash less than a full load in a front loader, **RADIANT** sachets or **WHITE TULIP** tablets — our Best Buys for front loaders in terms of cost per wash — might not be the best choice because you can't reduce the dosage from one tablet or sachet per load of washing. In a top loader, **OMO** and **RADIANT XL** use two portions for

PHOTO: BECKHA THWAITE

ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY?

Phosphates in laundry detergents help soften the water and keep extracted dirt from being redeposited onto your washing. There also appears to be some correlation between phosphate levels and performance — the higher the level, the better the wash.

Unfortunately, high phosphate levels in the environment can cause excessive algal growth in inland waterways and reduce the oxygen levels, which can make rivers toxic and destroy aquatic life. Expert opinion is divided on how much domestic laundry detergents contribute to this problem, but some products state on their packaging how much phosphorus per wash they produce. See the table for details.

Laundry Tablets

Brand (in rank order by category)

	1 Washing performance score (%)	2 Cost per wash (c)	Number of tablets/sachets (per packet)	Number of washes (per packet)	3 Phosphorus (g/wash)	Manufacturer / distributor	Target price (\$)*
FOR FRONT LOADERS							
OMO MATIC Tablets	91	58	24	12	10.0	Unilever	6.99
RADIANT XL Concentrated soluble sachets (A)	85	31	16	16	6.1	Cussons	4.99
WHITE TULIP Concentrated washing tablets (A)	82	20	18	18	ns	Pascoes	3.70
FOR TOP LOADERS							
OMO High Performance tablets	91	58	24	12	10.0	Unilever	6.99
RADIANT XL Concentrated soluble sachets (A)	87	62	16	8	6.1	Cussons	4.99
WHITE TULIP Concentrated washing tablets (B)	67	20	18	18	less than 2	Pascoes	3.67
WHITE TULIP Concentrated washing tablets (A)	70	20	18	18	less than 2	Pascoes	3.70
COLD WATER	46						

* Prices shown are a good target to aim for based on nationwide checks in March 2001. Anything lower is a bargain.

ns Not stated.
(A) The same product is suitable for top and front loaders.
(B) For top loaders only.

1 Relative washing performance score

We used specially soiled cotton and polycotton swatches attached to a load of laundry items, using the lowest dose recommended for a normal load and in cold (20°C) water. We used a spectrophotometer (a sensitive electronic 'eye') to measure how much dirt remained and therefore how much the detergents had removed, converting this into a washing performance score. The test was run three times for each detergent, in washing machines filled to 70% of their claimed load capacity. To give relative washing performance, we compared the results with 'best wash' swatches that had been washed six times in good-quality detergent.

The electronic eye is more sensitive than the human eye; differences of 6% are visible.

2 Cost per wash

We calculated how many washes you'll get from each packet, based on the target price and the dose the manufacturer recommends for a normal wash.

3 Phosphorus

Industry standards set the maximum level at 7.8 g of phosphorus per wash. We've listed the amount claimed by the manufacturers per wash, but didn't test this. **RADIANT** claims to be lower than the standard, while **OMO MATIC** tablets give 10 g per wash. The **WHITE TULIP** products don't state an amount, but claim to be lower than the industry standard; **OMO High Performance** tablets have no indication whether the tablets meet the standard, but we were told the levels on enquiry.

an average full load of washing, so you could use just one tablet or sachet for half a load.

In a top loader the two **WHITE TULIP** products don't give as good a wash result using the recommended dose. **OMO** and **RADIANT XL** scored considerably higher, and **OMO** costs no more per wash as in powder form.

How did they wash?

Most gave good results; at least as good as their equivalent powders, and there were no problems with solubility — all dissolved within a few minutes, so they won't leave powder residue on your clothes — see the table for washing performance scores.

Like their loose powder counterparts, some specify use in a top or front loader.

■ **Front loaders:** In our tests tablets and sachets designed for front loaders all gave a good or very good wash. **WHITE TULIP** is the Best Buy at 20 cents per wash; the **OMO MATIC** tablets cost a bit more per wash than the powder; and the **RADIANT** sachets are nearly twice as expensive per wash as their powder counterpart.

■ **Top loaders:** The **OMO** tablets, powders and concentrates cost about the same and all wash very

well. The **RADIANT** sachets cost nearly twice as much per wash as their powder counterparts.

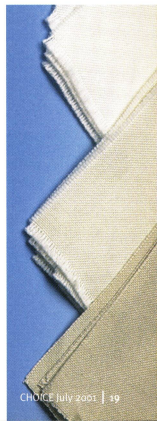
■ **Front and top loaders:** There were mixed results for products suitable for both a front and top loader. The **RADIANT** sachets washed well in both, but again cost nearly twice as much as the equivalent powder and concentrates. The **WHITE TULIP** tablets did a lot better in a front loader (neither of the **WHITE TULIPS** did as well in the top loader).

Are they for everyone?

They could be handy for travellers, because they're convenient, less messy than powders and usually less expensive than paying for powder at a public laundry.

But all these products (including the equivalent powders and concentrates) contain enzymes that help break down protein, starch and biologically based stains such as blood, sweat and make-up. So people with sensitive skin might do best to avoid them, as enzymes can cause irritation. ■

Top to bottom: Best wash, worst wash (in plain cold water) and unwashed.



IN A NUTSHELL

You can save money by choosing a good long-distance call plan and using override codes to take advantage of special deals. But choosing the right plan can be very hard work. Some are just too difficult to understand or compare.

■ We've identified the best long-distance and local offers for four different customer scenarios, including plans with special deals for people who use the Internet and make international calls.

■ We also list the cheapest long-distance and fixed-to-mobile rates if you want to use override to find the best deals from a variety of services.

IT'S A TOUGH CALL...

You've seen the clever ads and special deals. Are they too good to be true? Is there real competition? Can you really save money by changing your phone plan or signing up with a new service provider?

Over the past few months, we've liaised with 10 nationally available telephone service providers to complete this comparison of their long-distance call plans and local call rates. We've come to the conclusion that customer service isn't necessarily their strength.

There were times when we struggled to get correct information from some companies. We were often told one thing when we checked data with customer service staff, only to find completely different information on the company's website. We were left wondering about the quality and accuracy of information supplied to the public.

Some service providers seem to be making their plans as complicated as possible. If you consider all the features, specials, contract conditions and restrictions, it's very difficult and extremely time-consuming to compare deals. This lack of clarity contradicts everything consumers are told about competition giving them choice and better value for money.

We've also discovered call plan restrictions and conditions that we think are downright unfair and could be anti-competitive (see page 26 for some of the traps).

We've cut through all this to help you to reduce the cost of long-distance and local calls. The right plan should also help with the cost of international and data (Internet) calls.

Perhaps it's time you gave your phone bill a closer look and started shopping around for a better deal.

Give your phone company a wake-up call and shop around for a better long-distance phone plan.

GETTY IMAGES

WHAT WE DID

We've analysed 32 long-distance plans from 10 nationally available service providers. We looked at their time ranges and call rates for national calls, local call rates, calls to mobiles and contract conditions. International call deals and Internet packages available with the plans were also considered. Our results were then weighted according to the needs of four different consumer scenarios.

We can recommend only one **TELSTRA** plan for two scenarios — a poor result for the national carrier. Its rates and the conditions of its plans should be much more competitive. **OPTUS** wasn't much better — only one of its plans was recommended for two scenarios.

In fact we didn't find huge price differences between some plans. We think this means competition within the industry is flattening out and that's bad news for consumers.

You can increase your savings by taking advantage of override codes to get cheaper deals from other companies. See *The cheapest deals*, page 27, for more information.

ONE.TEL was originally included in our analysis but, as the magazine went to print, the company had been placed in voluntary administration, and the administrator was attempting to wind down its activities.

HOW TO CHOOSE A PHONE PLAN

Use this step-by-step guide as a starting point for choosing the best long-distance call plan and local call rates.

Step 1: Consider your current service

Who is your current telephone service provider and exactly what 'service' are you paying for? Recent phone bills are the best place to start looking for the answers.

The bills should tell you the name of your current service provider and the name of your long-distance call plan if you've already chosen one. If old accounts don't give you enough information, you'll need to contact the company.

Step 2: Think about how you use the phone

Look at past bills to get an accurate picture of how you use the phone. They'll show the number of local, long-distance and fixed-to-mobile calls you make each month. You may also want to consider international calls and your Internet needs if you want your phone company to also be your ISP.

There are usually different rates for calls between different regions (see long distance calls on page 23), capital cities, and calls from your home phone to mobiles. The days and times you make calls will also have an influence on their cost. Different plans will have better deals for particular call types, times and destinations.

Do patterns emerge over a number of bills? You might realise most of your calls are local or to mobiles. Perhaps you're more inclined to make long-distance calls at the weekend. Maybe you tend to phone mobiles of an evening. Talk to your provider so you understand your current deal and can compare it properly with others.

Step 3: Add up what you spend

Now start putting costs next to those call patterns. Look at how much you spend each month on different types of calls. You'll also need to itemise your monthly line rental, any extra membership or service charges and any fees for added services or benefits.

If you use the Internet itemise those costs too — particularly if your phone company is also your ISP or you're paying timed rates for data (Internet) calls.

Another option is to consider changing the way you use the phone to save money. Try changing the times and days that you make certain types of calls.

Step 4: Find the best deal

There are two elements: price and service. Our *Guide to assessing phone plans*, above right, will help you find a plan with the best conditions and a reasonable price. Service is more difficult to judge.

- Is the service available in your area? See *The service providers and plans* on page 22 to find out which plans are available in your area. Check there are no restrictions for the areas you want to call or you're calling from.
- Will the service be reliable? This is very difficult to assess. Even the Australian Communications Authority has difficulty getting comparable information out of the companies about their responsiveness to customers. One thing in your favour is the Customer Service Guarantee (right).
- Once you've chosen a plan keep looking for special deals from other companies. You may be able to use override to take advantage of them (see above right).

GUIDE TO ASSESSING PHONE PLANS

We've put long-distance call plans to the test to come up with recommendations for four different types of phone user. For the results of our analysis see *Does one of these suit you?*, page 23.

If you want to use this article to pick a plan more precisely tailored to your needs, this *Guide* gives details of many of the deals offered by the various providers, and clarifies some of the industry's definitions and jargon.

Comprehensive data on each plan is available from Choice Online, www.choice.com.au. If you don't have Internet access, contact our customer service department on 1800 069 552 for a printed copy of our database.

PRESELECTION AND OVERRIDE

When you preselect to a particular provider's plan, that provider becomes your default phone company for long distance calls. Each time you dial a long distance number that company will charge you. Most plans require preselection before you're entitled to special offers or local call rebilling (see page 22). The exception is DIGIPLUS, which doesn't usually have preselection. For access to their services, you have to be registered to use their override code.

Each phone service provider also has a four-digit override code. If you're not a preselected customer, you can register with most companies to use their codes when it suits you and be billed for calls made through them. You simply enter the

Don't forget the Customer Service Guarantee

This imposes a compulsory level of performance on all phone companies in relation to the arrangements they make with customers to connect services and fix faults for normal and enhanced services. It sets timeframes for connections and rectifying faults or service difficulties. The time periods vary depending on your location.

If a company breaches the maximum timeframes, it has to pay you compensation for each day it's late. You can opt to have an alternative service (like a mobile charged at standard rates) instead of compensation or you can waive your rights. You no longer have to make a valid claim to receive compensation. If the company is liable, it has to pay compensation, not wait for your request. If you're not sure where you stand, contact the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman (TIO) on 1800 062 058 for more information.

THE SERVICE PROVIDERS AND PLANS

We assessed 32 plans from 10 providers for preselected customers. (See *Preselection and override* on page 21 for an explanation of how phone plans work.) To be included, the plans must be available in at least two states. For information about plan restrictions, see *Does one of these suit you?* (far right) and *Contract traps and limits* on page 26. Unless stated, plans are available Australia-wide. Some remote rural areas may be excluded with all plans so it's always best to check.

■ **AAPT: Smartchat Full Service** includes local calls; Smartchat 'mates' has 25% discount on all long-distance calls between preselected Smartchat customers. Phone 13 88 88 or go to www.smartchat.com.au.

■ **DIGIPLUS: Standard**. 1300 361 441 or go to www.digiplus.com.au (this plan is for override customers) intercapital rates exclude Darwin and Hobart.

■ **DINGO BLUE: Residential** (preselected customers only, not available as an override service). Call 1300 551 455 or see www.dingoblue.com.au.

■ **ECOMTEL: Phone Club; Residential**. Call 1300 138 887 or go to www.ecomtel.com.au. Phone Club available only in Adelaide, Brisbane, Canberra, Melbourne,

Perth, Sydney and the Gold Coast. Intercapital rates exclude Darwin and Hobart.

■ **OPTUS: Non-cable plans — 20 cent plan, 15 cent plan, Long Distance Stand Alone; cable plans — 20 cent Standard, 20 cent One Touch Advance, 15 cent One Touch Advance**. www.optus.com.au or call 1300 300 990. Cable plans available only in Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane.

■ **ORANGE: (see *How Orange Works* on page 24 for details) Orange One Standard, One/30, One/60, One/120, Bright 38, Bright 58, Bright 88, Bright 128, Long Distance Standard**. Call 133 488 or go to www.orange.net.au. This is a mobile phone service available only in Sydney (including Newcastle and Wollongong) and Melbourne (including Geelong).

■ **PRIMUSTEL: 16 cent plan, 18.5 cent plan**. Call 1300 858 585 or go to www.primustel.com.au.

■ **RSLCOM: Ezi Talk** is only available to customers who have a mobile phone. Call 1800 556 677 or go to www.rslcom.com.au.

■ **TELSTRA: HomeLine Budget, HomeLine Net, HomeLine Part, HomeLine Complete, HomeLine Plus** (\$1.98 or \$2.97 capped call option). Call 1800 266 000 or see www.telstra.com.au.

■ **WORLDXCHANGE: GoTalk Plans One, Two and Three**. Call 1800 651 499 or go to www.worldxchange.com.au.

Our data and recommendations were current at the end of May. Please check with the companies to ensure they haven't changed their plans or rates since then.

override code immediately before the normal telephone number.

In fact, we think you'll end up with the best deal if you play the field. Find a call plan that's right for you and then register with other companies to use their override codes to take advantage of specials and discounts.

But beware, for certain plans, once you tie yourself to a plan, you may find that your use of override codes is restricted. CHOICE thinks this practice is unfair and could be anti-competitive and we'd like to see it stopped by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC).

For example, you can't make override calls to ECOMTEL if you're a preselected OPTUS cable customer. You can't make any override calls at all if you're a TELSTRA HomeLine Budget or HomeLine Net customer.

You can't use override with any of the ORANGE mobile-based plans.

LINE RENTAL

This is the amount you pay each month for having a TELSTRA or OPTUS phone line

"Lowest scorers" were almost exclusively TELSTRA and OPTUS plans.

connected to your home. If you've opted to have your local calls charged through another service provider, it will be sent a line rental bill by one of these two network providers. In most cases your service provider will then charge you line rental at its own rate.

The cheapest line rental we found was \$14.50 — but the plans were limited — and the most expensive was \$24.50.

Beware of extra fees with some plans. We've included access fees, membership fees and plan fees in our assessment. They can make some phone plans more expensive. For example:

■ Four out of eight ORANGE plans charge a \$16.50 monthly access fee. But three plans also have a minimum monthly call value, which can range from \$33 to \$132.00 depending on the plan. Their other four

plans have no access fee, but still charge a minimum monthly call value (from \$38 to \$128), irrespective of the number of calls you make. They become expensive if you make very few calls. You'll still have to pay that minimum even if you don't make any calls. These plans can be economical as long as you can accurately gauge how you use the phone. There's also a \$49.50 connection fee for ORANGE plans.

■ PRIMUSTEL's 16 cent plan has a \$3.69 plan fee in addition to its \$17.50 monthly line rental.

■ With a name like HomeLine Budget, you'd expect this TELSTRA plan to have the cheapest line rental. Well, if you can keep your bill below \$22.75 per month, you'll pay \$15.30 line rental instead of \$17.50. However, when calculating your bill, TELSTRA deducts the full \$17.50 line rental from the \$22.75. You can only make \$5.20 worth of calls each month (about one local call a day) to be entitled to the \$15.30 line rental. If your bill is one cent over \$22.75, your line rental will end up costing \$19.70

(\$17.50 plus the \$2.20 plan fee) — and that's far from a budget deal.

■ In addition to \$17.50 line rental for ECOMTEL Phone Club, you'll have to pay a \$10 monthly membership fee. It also has a once-off \$15 sign-up fee. And you have to pay \$100 in advance. Each time your Phone Club account drops below \$20, they top it up with another \$100 debit from your credit card or bank account.

LOCAL CALLS

All local calls currently go through the TELSTRA or OPTUS networks, except ORANGE (see *How Orange works* on page 24). Other service providers will usually only offer you their local call rate if you preselect one of their long-distance call plans. TELSTRA then 're-bill' you at their local call rate.

The cheapest local call rate is 15 cents; the most expensive is 22 cents. If you make 100 local calls per month, switching from the most expensive to the cheapest plan would save you about \$7 a month or \$84 a year.

■ Some companies do let you use override for local calls. If you want the RSLCOM local rate, you have to use their override code. DIGIPLUS is another example.

■ WORLDXCHANGE offers timed local calls on its override service (12 cents per minute plus a flag fall of 15 cents per call).

■ DIGIPLUS offers cheaper (15 cent) local calls if you make one international call per month using their override service.

■ TELSTRA is the only service to offer 'neighbourhood' calls. If you call a number sharing the same exchange number as yours, it'll be billed at a lower rate, but TELSTRA's local calls are among the most expensive at between 18.5 and 22 cents.

LONG-DISTANCE CALLS

These include calls between capital cities or regions, to mobiles (national) and overseas (international).

FLAG FALL

This is a flat fee you pay with each long-distance call. The cheapest flag fall is 16.5 cents, the most expensive 22 cents.

Some plans also charge a minimum number of seconds for the call — either six or 30 — in addition to the flag fall. They

DOES ONE OF THESE SUIT YOU?

As your starting point for saving money match your situation with one of the following scenarios. Check out the plans we recommend, based on your location and features you want. Then use override codes to make further savings by taking advantage of the cheapest deals.

How we scored

We analysed 10 key attributes for each long-distance call plan including: line rental, local call rates, long-distance call flagfall, all long-distance call rates, time ranges for peak, off-peak/economy and capped call rates, fixed-to-mobile time ranges and rates, contract conditions and billing features. Our scores were then weighted according to the needs of our scenarios to come up with our *What to buy* recommendations. The scenarios are based on information supplied by consumers and phone companies. We also looked at the coverage requirements of each scenario to ensure plans include other necessary services; for example plans were excluded if they had timed local calls, timed Internet calls or they didn't provide Internet deals — depending on each scenario's needs.



RIKHOA TWYMAN

Scenario 1: AVERAGE USER, ALL SERVICES

The Benson family are 'average' phone users. They make an average number of local, national and fixed-to-mobile calls from their home phone each month (they live in Melbourne). They have relatives living overseas so make regular international calls. They have the Internet connected but only use it about five to eight hours a week. They're looking for a package deal that will provide them with all their phone services for the lowest possible cost.

CALL PATTERNS*

Call type	Rate	Minutes*	No./month**
Local	Local	na	120
Intercapital	Off-peak	20	20
Regional	Peak	5	16
Fixed-to-mobile	Peak	2	2
Fixed-to-mobile	Off-peak	2	10

* Average number of minutes spent on the phone.

** Average number of calls per month.

Scenario call patterns are an estimate of the type, number and duration of calls based on information about home phone usage from consumers and service providers. Scenario One also makes international calls and recommended plans have special international rates for preselected customers (we didn't have the scope in this article to score international call rates). Internet deals were also considered.

WHAT TO BUY

AAPT Smartchat Full Service
TELSTRA HomeLine Plus \$1.98
PRIMUSTEL 16 cent
WORLDXCHANGE Go Talk 1
DIGIPLUS Standard

RSLcom was the highest scorer for this scenario but it can't be recommended because it doesn't have an Internet service.

How Orange works

ORANGE is only available in Sydney (including Newcastle and Wollongong) and Melbourne (including Geelong). It has one plan that you can use with any fixed phone — the **ORANGE** long-distance standard plan. Otherwise its plans are for mobile phones.

With the **Orange One** and **Orange Bright** plans, your mobile works like a fixed phone when you're at home or within about a 100 metre radius of your home. Local, long-distance and calls to mobiles are charged at rates that are comparable to those charged by its competitors.

Once you move out of your 'home zone' your phone operates like a normal mobile phone and **ORANGE** mobile rates apply.

You have to have an **ORANGE** mobile phone to become an **Orange One** or **Orange Bright** customer. It offers free phones for these plans, but the contract terms are long and the cancellation fees are high. For example, with the **Orange Bright 38** plan, if you wanted to leave 12 months into an 18 month contract, the cancellation fee could be over \$400.

Some **ORANGE** plans can be very expensive because they have a minimum monthly call value (see *Line rental* on page 22). You can't use override with these plans.

are: **DIGIPLUS Standard** (30 seconds) and **DINGO BLUE Residential**.

Where are you calling?

The location you make some long-distance phone calls from and to will make a difference to their cost.

PRIMUSTEL and **TELSTRA** divide their long-distance calls into ranges. These vary slightly but you'll generally pay different rates for calls less than 50 km, another for calls between 50 km and 85 km or 165 km, another for calls up to 745 km and a higher rate for even longer distances.

OPTUS Non-cable, **RSLCOM** and **WORLDXCHANGE** have a single national call rate.

Companies that have a long distance/short distance structure are **AAPT**, **OPTUS Cable** and **ORANGE**. **ECOMTEL** divides calls into intercapital, short distance and long distance. The following companies have an intercapital/other structure: **DIGIPLUS** and **DINGO BLUE**.

Intercapital

Make sure the plan allows you to call from and to the cities you require. The only services to cover all capital cities are: **DINGO BLUE**, **PRIMUSTEL** and **TELSTRA**. The last has two rates — one for intercapital calls under 745 km and another for longer distances.

Some plans don't give you intercapital rates on calls to or from Darwin and Hobart. The Gold Coast is the area most frequently

added to the intercapital group. Other cities included by some providers are Newcastle, Wollongong and Geelong.

Community and pastoral calls

TELSTRA offers 'pastoral' calls on all plans for remote rural customers who don't have access to untimed local calls. The calls are charged at 22 cents for each five minutes, 24 hours a day.

AAPT, **OPTUS** and **TELSTRA** also offer 'community calls' — reduced-rate calls to the next local service town or area, up to about 50 km. **OPTUS** community calls are only available in the Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney areas with its cable plans.

TELSTRA's community calls are available, for all plans to about 2.6 million customers.

TELSTRA has recently been selected to provide untimed local calls in rural and remote areas — which may end up replacing pastoral and community calls.

Peak, off-peak or economy?

The time you make a long-distance call will have an impact on its cost. Peak times can be the most expensive — usually from around 7 am to 6 pm on weekdays. **OPTUS** has the longest peak period — 24 hours, Monday to Friday. **AAPT** has the shortest, 9 am to 6 pm Monday to Friday.

Off-peak periods are more varied and some are far more generous than others.

For example, **DINGO BLUE's** 6pm to 8am week days plus 24 hours on Saturday and Sunday. It doesn't offer an economy rate but it's cheaper than most off-peak and some economy rates anyway.

Other plans have shorter off-peak periods (for evenings during the week, for example) and offer a cheaper economy rate at the weekend.

Don't assume a company is more expensive because it doesn't have an economy rate. In fact, seven out of the 10 providers we've assessed don't have economy rates.

Capped calls

Capped calls give you the opportunity to make national calls for a set price (ranging from \$1.49 to \$3) during specified hours of the day. They're a good idea if you make long distance calls that tend to last about half an hour. Only a few plans don't offer them: **ORANGE Long Distance Standard**, **TELSTRA HomeLine Net** and **WORLDXCHANGE Override**. Calls have to begin and end within

TELSTRA DISCOUNTS

Most **TELSTRA** plans couldn't be recommended for our scenarios. However, it's still by far our biggest service provider. So how do **TELSTRA's** Rewards and Relationships discount options work if you're a preselected customer?

- If you put your **TELSTRA** home phone and mobile on the same bill, you'll receive 5% off all your calls.
- If you put your home phone and BigPond Internet service on the one bill, you're entitled to a 5% discount on all service costs.
- If your home phone, mobile and BigPond Internet service are all on the one bill, you'll get 10% off home phone calls, mobile calls and BigPond service costs.
- If you have Mobile Net Flexi Plan 25 or higher and you get a single bill for home phone and mobile, you'll receive 50% off 'eligible' calls including mobile-to-home and calls between mobiles if you have more than one. If your mobile plan is 'lower' than Flexi Plan 25, the same deal applies but with a 25% deduction.

the capped call period or regular long-distance rates will apply.

Most plans offer capped calls between 6 pm or 7 pm and midnight on week nights or every day. **OPTUS** offers capped calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week, though you can only stay on the phone for a maximum of three hours per call.

ECOMTEL specifies that its capped calls are only available for preselected customers.

It pays to check both the advertised capped call period and the terms and conditions that may limit your use of it.

Fixed-to-mobile calls

Different peak and off-peak call periods may apply for calls from your home phone to a mobile. **DIGIPLUS**, **ORANGE**, **RSLCOM** and **TELSTRA** have the same time ranges as for national calls. Most plans have the same rates for calls to **OPTUS/VODAFONE** and **TELSTRA MobileNet**.

ECOMTEL, **OPTUS**, **PRIMUS** and **WORLDXCHANGE** have a single flat rate for all fixed-to-mobile calls. **ORANGE** and

TELSTRA have preferential rates for calls made to their own networks. **RSLCOM** has preferential rates but you're limited to three specific **RSLCOM** mobile numbers.

Fixed-to-mobile calls are generally more expensive than other long-distance calls. **TELSTRA** has the most expensive peak rate at 44 cents a minute and off-peak rate at 27.5 cents per minute. The cheapest peak rate is **ECOMTEL Phone Club** at 31 cents a minute. The cheapest off-peak is 20.9 cents for **DINGO BLUE** and **ORANGE**.

OPTUS, **ORANGE** and **TELSTRA** are the only services to offer capped calls from home phones to mobiles, though some plans are excluded.

Bundled offers

If you also use the Internet and/or make international calls, you may be able to find a better rate for them by choosing the right long-distance call plan. The Internet deals only apply if the company's also your Internet service provider (ISP). We didn't comprehensively score international

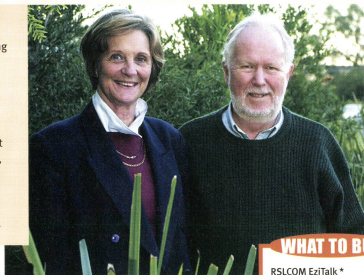
If you have a problem

If you can't resolve a problem with the company, contact the Telecommunications Industry Ombudsman on 1800 062 058 or go to www.tio.com.au. The TIO has been actively involved in developing industry codes of practice covering billing, caller ID, complaint handling, credit management, prices, terms and conditions, privacy and selling practices.

In 1999–2000 the TIO investigated 56,504 issues. The three biggest categories of complaint were billing, provision of service and customer transfer from one plan or provider to another.

Scenario two: BASIC USERS

Gordon and Josephine Lucas are retirees, living in Sydney. They have very basic telephone requirements — they only ever use the phone to make local and national calls. Occasionally they have to call one of their children or grandchildren on their mobile, so they also need to make fixed-to-mobile calls. They don't want to be tied to one phone service provider, wanting to use override to take advantage of cheap deals offered by other companies from time to time. They don't have the Internet connected and don't make international calls.



BRONCA THIMME

CALL PATTERNS

Call type	Rate	Minutes*	No./month**
Local	Local	na	45
Intercapital	Off-peak	15	4
Regional	Peak	10	1
Fixed-to-mobile	Peak	2	2
Fixed-to-mobile	Off-peak	2	10

* Average number of minutes spent on the phone.

** Average number of calls per month.

Scenario call patterns are an estimate of the type, number and duration of calls based on information about home phone usage from consumers and service providers.

WHAT TO BUY

RSLCOM EzTalk*
ECOMTEL Phone Club
ECOMTEL Residential
OPTUS 15 cent (non-cable)+
PRIMUSTEL x6 cent

* Local call billing for this plan is only available using the **RSLCOM** override code. You need a mobile phone to be an **RSLCOM** customer.

+ Can't use override code to access **ECOMTEL** services with any **OPTUS** plan.

and Internet deals, but some of the specials include:

- **During AAPT's Smart Half Hour** preselected customers can call selected countries for a maximum of \$2.50 for the first half hour. The normal per minute rate applies after the first 30 minutes.
- **DIGIPLUS** offers a \$5 monthly Internet discount on its multi-user plan if you make \$5 worth of long-distance and international calls in the billing month.
- **DINGO BLUE:** Their Small Bytes plan offers an Internet discount of \$5 per month. The Big Bytes discount is \$21.50 per month.
- **ECOMTEL Phone Club** customers can receive 20% off the normal rate for calls to the US, UK, New Zealand and Canada and up to 50% off normal international rates to selected countries. And there's no Internet

set-up fee and a discounted \$14.45 per month unlimited time with free download of 300 Mb per month.

- **OPTUS** has Free-time deals. Different cut-off amounts apply for different countries.

It offers a choice of up to five web packages. There are also bonus Internet time offers with free installation and line rental deals.

- **PRIMUSTEL** customers can choose one country to call at a preferential rate or a pre-set group of five countries at preferential rates. There are three sets of countries to choose from.
- Reduced 0011 and 0018 rates apply for some **TELSTRA** plans. It has five premium and five ISDN plans, another for high volume users in capital cities and another that gives Australia-wide local access.
- **WORLDXCHANGE** has cheaper international

rates for preselected customers, and capped international calls are planned. It provides your first three months Internet access for \$9.90 a month.

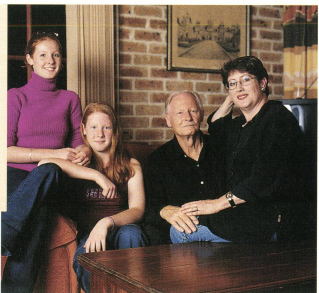
Contract traps and limits

Beware of terms and conditions in the fine print that may end up making a plan much more costly than it looks. Some terms and conditions (**TELSTRA**, **OPTUS** and **PRIMUSTEL**) can be very confusing.

- **ECOMTEL Phone Club** currently treats 'local' data calls (Internet connection calls) as timed long-distance calls — that's why it can't be recommended for the scenarios that use the Internet. The company says this will be changed later in the year. Without this, **ECOMTEL's** plans would've made it into each of our *What to buy* lists.
- You'll have to pay an \$82.50 cancellation

Scenario three: LOVES TO CHAT

Monica Williams loves to chat with her mum on the phone, even though she lives interstate. The Williams family (living in Brisbane) also has a close relative living in Italy to stay in touch with and a friend living in the US, so there are some international calls. This is a busy household and the kids love the Net so there are also usually lots of local calls on the bill. Mum, dad and the oldest daughter all have mobiles to keep in touch, so cheap fixed-to-mobile calls are a must. This household doesn't want to be tied to one phone company — they want to be able to use override to take advantage of cheap deals offered by competitors from time to time.



PHOTOGRAPH BY THANE

CALL PATTERNS*

Call type	Rate	Minutes*	No./month**
Local	Local	na	200
Intercapital	Off-peak	30	20
Regional	Off-peak	10	5
Regional	Peak	5	20
Fixed-to-mobile	Peak	2	8
Fixed-to-mobile	Off-peak	2	20

* Average number of minutes spent on the phone.

** Average number of calls per month.

† Scenario call patterns are an estimate of the type, number and duration of calls based on information about home phone usage from consumers and service providers.

Scenario three also makes international calls and uses the Internet so we've recommended plans that have special deals for both.

WHAT TO BUY

None of the plans was outstanding for this scenario but those that had the best long-distance and capped call rates and times that were available in Brisbane were:

- AAPT Smartchat Full Service
- WORLDXCHANGE Go Talk 1
- TELSTRA Homeline Plus \$1.98
- DIGIPLUS Standard

Both **ECOMTEL** plans would've also been recommended but they have timed data (Internet) calls.

fee if you want to get out of an **OPTUS** cable plan before the 12 month contract is up.

■ Some plans restrict your use of override see page 22 for details.

Specials and sweeteners

There are also plenty of specials available but always check for conditions and restrictions.

■ If you sign up a 'mate' with **AAPT Smartchat**, you both receive a \$10 credit. And **AAPT Smartchat 'mates'** gives you 25% off long-distance calls from one **AAPT** customer to another (fixed-to-mobile calls not included).

■ Pensioners receive a \$1 discount on line rental for **OPTUS** non-cable plans.

■ **DIGIPLUS** gives you 10 free local calls per month for every new customer you introduce for every month they remain an active customer. New accounts receive a \$10 credit, and you can earn 'digipoints' towards products, gift vouchers, etc. On 'Digi Days' there are 10% discounts on long distance and international calls. Seniors, medical workers, taxi drivers and police get a 10% discount across the board.

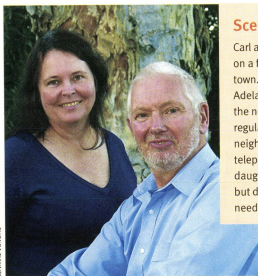
■ **DINGO BLUE** says it will refund twice the difference on a cheaper long-distance or international call made through another provider, although conditions apply.

■ **ECOMTEL** will give you a free state lottery ticket per \$20 of your bill paid by the due date or for every \$20 on your bill if you're in **Phone Club**. If you introduce a new **Phone Club** member, you receive a \$25 credit.

■ **PRIMUSTEL** offers 7.7 cent per minute long-distance calls on Sundays (unless the usual rate is cheaper). You have to sign up for this discount.

■ **TELSTRA** offers pensioner rebates depending on the size of your bill and the plan you're with. See also *Telstra discounts* on page 24 for information about its 'Rewards and Relationship' discount options.

■ **WORLDXCHANGE** has the 'Go Talk Guarantee' — it says it'll pay double the difference if you find a company that would give you a lower monthly bill across all your calls than its standard offer (no specials). Conditions apply. ■



TERESA WOODHEAD

Scenario four: RURAL USERS

Carl and Jess live in rural South Australia on a farm 25 km from the nearest service town. Their son and daughter both live in Adelaide and Jess's elderly mother lives in the nearby township. They stay in fairly regular contact with their nearest neighbour, who lives 8 km away. Jess telephones her mum and her son and daughter regularly. They have the Internet but don't use it very often, and have no need to make international calls.

CALL PATTERNS *

Call type	Rate	Minutes*	No./month**
Local	Local	na	32
Intercapital	Off-peak	12	15
Regional	Peak	10	30
Fixed-to-mobile	Peak	2	8

* Average number of minutes spent on the phone.

** Average number of calls per month.

■ Scenario call patterns are an estimate of the type, number and duration of calls based on information about home phone usage from consumers and service providers. Internet deals were also considered for this scenario.

WHAT TO BUY

ECOMTEL Residential
PRIMUSTEL 16 cent National
WORLDXCHANGE Go Talk 1
OPTUS 15 cent (non-cable)

* Each time you make a data call (ie dial up the Internet) the call will be charged as a timed long distance (less than 50 km rate) call.

THE CHEAPEST DEALS

If you want to use override codes to find the cheapest deals, these were the best rates going at the end of May 2001. You'll need to register as an override customer with the company first. You'll be given the company's override code when you register.

■ National <50 km, peak: **ECOMTEL Phone Club** 7.9 cents/min, all **OPTUS** cable plans 7 cents/min.

■ National >50 km, peak: **ECOMTEL Phone Club** 13.9 cents/min.

■ National <50 km, off-peak/economy: **ECOMTEL Phone Club** 3.9 cents/min.

■ National >50 km, off-peak/economy: **PRIMUSTEL 16 cent plan** 8.8 cents/min.

■ National capped calls: **RSLCOM Ezitalk National**, \$1.90.

■ National fixed-to-mobile, peak: **ECOMTEL Phone Club**, 31 cents/min.

■ National fixed-to-mobile, off-peak/economy: **DINGO BLUE Residential**, all **ORANGE** plans, 20.9 cents/min.

COVET AN oriental carpet?

Add an oriental rug or two to your home and you'll have rich colouring combined with good looks, easy care and versatility.

IN A NUTSHELL

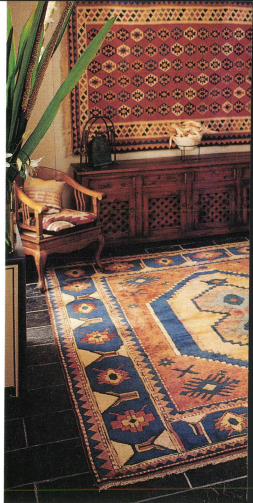
- **Shop around** — get to know the market by comparing products and prices.
- **See what the rug looks like** in your home before you buy it; reputable shops will let you do this.
- **Get smart or get ripped off** — follow our tips on what to look for in a carpet, page 31.
- **A smallish rug** (say 1.2 x 1.8 m) consists of 200,000 to 650,000 knots. A skilled weaver can tie about 6000 knots a day, which (depending on the quality) requires between seven and 20 weeks' work for a rug this size. It certainly puts the \$400 to \$1000 you spend on it into perspective.

It's difficult to go past the charm, mystique and beauty of an oriental carpet. Their origin traditionally stretches from the Balkans and Turkey, through Iran (home of the often synonymous Persian carpet), Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tibet and Nepal to India and China.

But with many shonky dealers and carpets of dubious quality on the market, buying one can be a bit daunting — especially when you're planning to spend a fair bit of money on it. We can help you choose a good carpet, from a reputable retailer, that'll give you a lifetime of use and pleasure.

WHAT SORT TO CHOOSE

- If you're after cheap, temporary floor covering, you may be better off with a machine-made carpet. At least you won't panic when the kids bring out their paint sets. But another option could be a kilim or dhurrie — rugs that are flat woven without a pile rather than hand knotted. While not as durable as a knotted carpet, they're usually cheaper, and come in a range of colours and designs to suit eastern and western interior designs.
- Hand-knotted oriental rugs are not only decorative but hard-wearing. With adequate care, you can expect one to last your lifetime. With this in mind, it may well be a better long-term investment than a lifetime



of cheaper carpets. Enthusiasts also argue that the carpet improves with age as it mellows and becomes an intrinsic part of the home.

- At the serious end of the market are antique and rare carpets, where you're looking at thousands rather than hundreds of dollars. The condition of antique carpets is testament to the durability of the product — although you probably wouldn't put one by the front door.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF CARPETS

Each region within the modern-day states that produce oriental carpets creates carpets in its own particular style, while each village — and even each family within the village — creates variations within the style. If you'd like to know more about the range and meaning of patterns and designs used in oriental carpets, read one of the books in *Recommended reading*, page 31, or visit the websites in *More information*, page 33.

Within the regions, carpets are also classified according to the social circumstances under which they were made:

- **Tribal** rugs were originally made by nomadic or semi-nomadic tribespeople, and



PHOTOS: GARY'S GALLERY



Antique rug

were woven for everyday use rather than ornament. Designs tend to be geometric, based on designs handed down over generations, and each item has its own unique character. They're made in villages today, but still retain the tribal designs.

■ **Village rugs** are made on a cottage industry basis, usually by women working at home. The designs are similar to the tribal rugs, with bold, angular geometric patterns.

■ **City or workshop rugs** are made in large workshops with many workers, and are more sophisticated and complex in design, often with intricate floral and curvilinear patterns. Technically, they're more finely woven than tribal and village rugs, although they lack the individuality of the more basic rugs, being made to a set pattern, with many similar versions available on the market.

IS IT AUTHENTIC?

This is the \$64,000 question (or the "Shall I buy this \$640 rug?" question, as the case may be). Many carpets these days are copies of traditional designs but made in China, Pakistan and India, usually in large workshops. Romania, Egypt and Turkey also

produce good copies. Reputable carpet dealers will disclose the true origin of the carpet (for example, "Persian Qashqai style, made in Pakistan"), while less reputable dealers will try to pass it off as an authentic Qashqai ("made in Iran") village rug.

If an Egyptian-made workshop 'Turkish' rug is just as good as or better than a Turkish-made one, why not buy the Egyptian one? Obviously authenticity is more important to some people than to those whose concern stops at form and function.

Further ambiguity arises with the movement of people, such as Afghani refugees who now live and work in Pakistan and Iran. Are their rugs Afghani? Or Pakistani/Iranian?

Some carpet experts will tell you it's not important where it's made, rather it's the quality that counts — and some 'copies' are of arguably better quality than the 'originals'. Ultimately it's almost impossible for the lay person to judge a carpet's authenticity, and with no regulation, labels and certificates mean little. If it really matters to you, you'll need to do some homework and find a good, reputable dealer; read on for what to look for in one.

MACHINE VS HANDMADE

Your main concern should be whether the carpet's genuinely hand- rather than machine-knotted — especially if that's what you're paying for.

Telling them apart

■ Bend the carpet so the pile is on the outside. You should be able to see a little knot at the base of each thread.

■ Look at the back of the carpet. The pattern should be clearly visible and look almost like a tapestry. The pattern of a machine-made carpet isn't so distinct.

■ The tufts on machine-made carpets are sometimes held together by glue or latex, so the back may have a rubber coating or be covered with calico or hessian.

■ The tufts may also be machine-stitched, rather than glued on, which may prove more durable.

■ The fringe of a handmade carpet is a continuation of the warp threads. The ends of a machine-made carpet will be overstitched or have a fringe sewn on.

Which is better?

Hand-knotted carpets are said to last much longer. However, this is largely dependent on the skill of the artisan and the quality of materials — better quality machine-made carpets may last longer than inferior handmade ones. However, a better quality handmade rug should retain some intrinsic value.

■ Handmade vs hand-knotted

Some carpets are hand-tufted, rather than hand-knotted, earning them the label 'handmade'. However, tufting is inferior to knotting: a piece of wool is passed back and forth through a base material, leaving a loop pile on the upper side. The tops of the loops are trimmed off, and the pile held in place with glue or latex on the bottom. Eventually the latex or glue will deteriorate and become brittle, so this type is ultimately no better than a machine-made rug. Make sure handmade really means hand-knotted before you buy.



Tribal rug



Villager rug



Workshop rug



Kilim (or dhurrie)

Buying a rug

SHOPPING TIPS

■ **Shop around.** This was the catchery of the carpet retailers we spoke to. See what you can get in terms of quality, design and price at a variety of different stores. You'll probably find the price difference between good and poor-quality rugs isn't that great, and obviously you'd be better off with a good one. How do you spot one? See *What to look for*, right.

■ **A little knowledge goes a long way.** Even before you hit the shops, you could benefit from learning a little about carpet-making areas, culture and the different designs and seeing lots of pictures of good rugs. A little knowledge about the meaning and history behind some of the designs and motifs, for example, might influence your decision on the carpet you want, as well as enhancing your appreciation and enjoyment of it. *Recommended reading* and *More information* list some resources.

■ **Try before you buy.** Take the carpet home with you to see if it works in your home — good retailers will often encourage you to do this. Some even provide an obligation-free home trial service, where they bring rugs to you. Examine it at different times of day, in different light, and

GLOSSARY

- The majority of modern knotted carpets are made using **Turkish** or symmetrical knots.
- **Persian knots** are asymmetrical and mainly found in city/workshop carpets, and some village carpets. These knots create a denser fabric than Turkish knots.
- The ends of the knotted threads form the **pile**.
- The **warp** threads run longitudinally through the rug, with the loose ends used as the fringe.
- **Weft** threads are woven over and under alternate warp threads on each side of a row of knots, holding the knots in place and forming, with the warp, the base of the carpet.
- A **kilim** or **dhurrie** is a rug that's woven, rather than knotted — that is, it consists only of warp and weft threads, with no pile.

try turning it around to see the nap in a different direction. Depending on your vantage point, this will change the tone of the rug from lighter to darker (or vice versa).

■ **Pay only what it's worth to you.** After comparing the value of like products, choose the product that appeals to your taste and situation. At the end of the day, buy at a price you're happy to pay. Don't be persuaded by apparently 'massive' price reductions and don't buy something in the hope it will increase in value.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

The shop

■ It's a good sign if a shop's been around for a long time — it has a reputation to protect. However, it's no cast-iron guarantee you'll get an authentic carpet (one that's made where it says it's made).

■ Prices should be clearly marked (and preferably not pretending to be an 87% discount).

■ Consider the attitude of salespeople, and avoid pushy ones. If they're sincere about suiting your best interests, they'll ask questions about where you'll be putting the carpet: traffic, lighting levels, type and colours of furnishings and so on.

■ A reputable dealer will actively encourage you to take a rug or two home on trial.

The carpet

■ The pile of village and tribal rugs is usually wool (or camel or goat hair), while city rugs use wool, silk or artificial silk (called 'art silk'). Wool is the most resilient material, although some wool, such as the tough, hairy, fibrous wools of west and central Asia, are considered better than softer, shinier wools. Silk is also very resilient, but this could also reflect the tendency of the owners of silk rugs to take more care of them.

In tribal and village rugs, wool is usually used for the **warp** and **weft** (see *Glossary*, below, for definitions). City rugs (and sometimes village rugs) usually have a cotton warp, and silk is sometimes used.

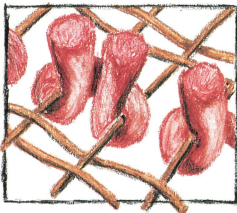
■ **Knots per square inch** was once considered the way to judge the quality of a carpet: the more the better. However, while it can be useful for comparing similar rugs, it doesn't tell the whole story — some rugs use poor-quality thin wool, amassing a high knot-count, while many older rugs using good-quality, coarse wool have a relatively low knot-count.

■ The **fringe** should be made from the warp threads, forming an integral part of the carpet's structure. If the fringe has been sewn on afterwards, or if the ends of the rug are sewn under, this could indicate that repairs have been made, the dye has run or that the rug is machine-made.

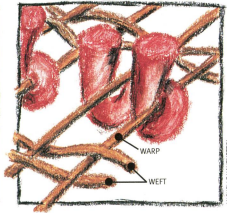
■ **Certificates and labels** can give a false sense of security, especially at the lower end of the market, where — in the absence of any recognisable, official national or international certification scheme — they become almost meaningless.

■ Tribal and village rugs may use **vegetable colours** from such plants as pomegranate, madder and indigo rather than **synthetic dyes**. One's not necessarily better-looking than the other — it comes down to personal preference. There's some concern that the heavy metals in synthetic dyes create an occupational hazard for the people who use them — as well as an environmental hazard — making vegetable dyes an ethical preference.

■ The colour should be clear, **without signs of running**. Obvious signs of colour run also detract from the carpet's appearance and value. Rub the surface of the carpet with a moistened white hanky. If colour comes off, inferior dyes have been used, and



The majority of modern knotted carpets are made using Turkish or symmetrical knots.



Persian or Senneh knots are asymmetrical and mainly found in Iranian carpets. These knots create a denser fabric than Turkish knots.

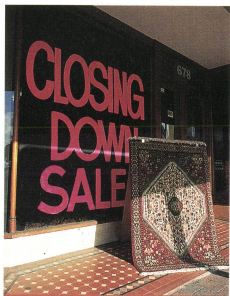
RECOMMENDED READING

Sydney retailer Ross Langlands has been involved with the sale of antique and rare carpets for over 20 years. He recommends the following books for people interested in learning a little more about the history and meaning of oriental rugs.

■ *Carpets: From the tents, cottages and workshops of Asia*, by Jon Thompson (Laurence King, 1993; \$45-50). Apart from being interesting and beautifully illustrated, it's a good investment if you're planning to spend big on one or more carpets.

If you're interested in kilims, Robert Cadry, whose family has been selling rugs in Sydney since 1952, recommends:

■ *Kilim: The complete guide*, by Alistair Hull & Jose Luczyc-Wyhowska (Thames and Hudson, 2000). It costs around \$75.



PHOTOGRAPH BY THOMAS

WHAT'S ALI BABA REALLY SAYING?

The following terminology is often used by Ali Baba and his friends. However, all is not necessarily as it seems ...

■ "Closing down soon!"

a) We may be closing in a few years; or
b) We're constantly on the move, keeping one step ahead of the creditors — and disgruntled customers.

■ "87% off!"

Check out the hyper-inflated 'before' prices on our price tags.

■ "Sale ends tomorrow!"

The hyper-inflated prices will disappear from our price tags, leaving only the regular prices.

■ "Today only!"

Today ... and tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that...

■ "Liquidation sale!"

We've just bought a shipment of inferior-quality carpets that we're willing to sell to you for the same price as good ones.

may run when it's cleaned. Avoid carpets with a coloured stripe on the underside of the carpet, parallel to the fringe, which is put there to hide stains caused by a bleaching agent used on the fringe. When the carpet's cleaned, this colour will run into the fringe.

■ Some carpets are washed with tea, giving a slightly **aged appearance**. It's not necessarily a deliberate attempt to fool the buyer — rather they're catering to western tastes for more muted tones by taking the harsh edge off the colours.

■ Don't be too disconcerted by slight **colour variations** throughout the carpet, especially if they appear in horizontal bands. This *abrax* is from inconsistencies in dye lots when dying by hand, especially with certain vegetable dyes that are difficult to control (such as indigo). It all adds to the carpet's individuality and charm.

■ You can feel the **nap** (the direction of the pile) by rubbing your hand over it: it's smooth one way, and there's resistance the other. The light also changes: it's lighter-looking in the direction of the nap, and darker against. In a handknotted carpet, the pile should all lie in the same direction and at about 45 degrees to the warp and weft. This way, when you have furniture sitting on it, the pile doesn't get permanently crushed. If the pile's at 90 degrees (as in machine-made rugs), the top gets squashed down, and permanently damaged.

■ Hand-knotted oriental carpets are almost always **asymmetrical**, and irregularities of 2–7 cm in width are considered acceptable.

■ The carpet should **lay flat** on the floor — lay it out on a hard, flat surface, because it may not be so obvious if it's sitting on a pile of other carpets. Buckles in the carpet indicate the warp threads have been pulled too tight, and the buckling won't come out.

■ The pile should be **evenly clipped** (except in embossed carpets, where it's cut at different lengths to highlight the patterns).

WHERE TO BUY

Auctions

■ **Auctions and liquidation sales** are best left to people who know what they're doing. While some of these sales involve good-quality products (such as those run by the large arts and antique auction houses), some sell inferior-quality carpets at relatively high prices. Your chances of getting a good

carpet may be better if you're allowed to inspect it properly, taking into account the advice given in *What to look for*, page 31.

However, even if the quality and price are good, you're at a disadvantage because you're buying on the spot and can't try the carpet out in your home to see how it looks. And if it does turn out to have major construction faults (such as inferior-quality dyes or other materials, which you may not discover until you come to clean it) you'll have no recourse — there's usually no permanent address provided and, when buying goods at auction, you don't have the right to a refund if they're faulty or defective. So it's very much a case of *caveat emptor*.

Shops

■ **Ali Baba's Forty Thieves** carpet shops. You know the type: they have 'closing down sale' permanently emblazoned on the windows and sales staff that make used-car salespeople look positively demure. Some have frequent sales, with apparently dramatic reductions: rugs with a 'regular' price of \$10,000 are 'slashed' to \$2000. You may get an appropriately priced carpet here, but you may get ripped off. And you're unlikely to get an absolute bargain.

■ **Department stores and general furniture stores** are a low-pressure option, although staff may not be as knowledgeable as in a specialty carpet store. Long-established chains have a reputation to uphold, and you know where to find them if you discover faults with the rug. Just make sure you can take it home on approval before you commit yourself to buying.

■ **Specialty dealers** know what they're talking about, and should make some effort to find out what you want — rather than try to sell you something they want you to buy. They're likely to sell only handmade rugs of good quality, and will encourage you to take the carpet home with you on trial. See *What to look for*, for tips.

■ **Antique and rare rug specialists** are not for the faint-hearted — age, quality and rarity mean you're entering the pricing realm of the fine arts. We recommend you look for a retailer that's a member of the *Australian Antique Dealers Association* (see *More information*, right, for contact details), especially if you're inexperienced. While fake antique carpets aren't a big problem in

Australia, you should beware of the Ali Babas trying to sell you one.

■ **The Internet** is an option for people who live in remote areas, or even in towns and smaller cities that don't have a large (or good-quality) range of carpets. Just make sure you can get the carpet on approval and return it if it's not suitable. The poor exchange rate and shipping charges may make overseas purchases prohibitively expensive, but there are some reputable Australian retailers on the Internet.

■ The best carpets are often snapped up by exporters, so a visit to a **carpet shop overseas** (Turkey or India, say) is unlikely to get you a better — or cheaper — rug than you can get here (especially if you're taken to the shop by a tour guide). Enthusiasts may disagree, but most people are better off buying at home from a reputable dealer. ■

MORE INFORMATION

The **Australian Antique Dealers Association** can be contacted on (03) 9576 2275. Tell them you're interested in buying an antique carpet, and they'll send you a list of member dealers (note: there are only about six, and they're based in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide).

For more about their history, buying tips and carpet care, the following websites are recommended:

■ www.jacobsenrugs.com/guide.htm.

■ www.orientalcarpets.com.au.

■ www.hali.com.au.

■ www.ocarpets.com/AboutRugs.asp.

Check our website for more information and links: www.choice.com.au

CHILD LABOUR: LEARNING A CRAFT OR SLAVERY?

Carpet-making is a craft with knowledge and skills passed from generation to generation. Children often learn the trade from an early age, helping their parents prepare the wool and perfecting weaving techniques.

However, when people talk of child labour used in carpet production, they're usually talking about the huge workshops of south Asia, particularly India, Pakistan and Nepal, where children as young as six are sold by their parents to workshop owners, and forced to work 12 hours or more per day. The working conditions are often appalling, and the children get no formal education and therefore no other job skills.

When news about the use of bonded child labour hit Europe and North America, carpet sales plummeted by almost one third in a matter of years as consumers boycotted products they considered were produced unethically. The loss of sales was devastating for these economies, and also affected ethical producers where child labour wasn't used.

There are now labelling schemes for carpets guaranteed not to be made with forced child labour. However, it's impossible to supervise every single workshop using the label, so it's largely a matter of faith.

If you want to be reasonably sure you're

not getting a carpet made using forced child labour, you can either avoid oriental carpets and go for contemporary local carpets, or you could:

■ Buy an antique — if you can be sure it's authentic. Large-scale slave-labour operations in the carpet industry are a relatively recent phenomenon, starting in the 1980s to meet a huge increase in demand.

■ If you could somehow be sure of the authenticity of its origins, you could buy one from central or west Asia (The Caucasus, Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan for example).

■ It's suggested that because children don't have the experience of adults, the carpets aren't as high in quality — so go for a medium or high-quality rug.

■ Buy from a Fair Trade company, such as Community Aid Abroad, although the range may be limited.

■ Our European-based counterparts recommend buying a machine-made rug to help eliminate bonded child labour.

There are no simple solutions, and any of these suggestions could then lead to other problems. For more on the issues involved, there are several articles on the International Labour Office's website: www.ilo.org.



AN EVOLVING CRAFT

While many of the motifs and designs featured in oriental carpets have been passed down through the ages, it's by no means caught in an ancient time warp. Modern elements have been incorporated into designs, such as this Afghan war rug, demonstrating the evolution of design. Maybe, in a couple of hundred years, these images of tanks, Kalishnikovs and hand grenades will be as mysterious to their viewers as some of the antique motifs we see today. Or maybe not.

You and Me

There's a new operating system,
but what's it mean to you?

IN A NUTSHELL

■ It's not really worth upgrading unless you're after one of the new features, or you're particularly unhappy with your current OS and have the hardware to handle it.

Me with a new computer?

If you buy a new computer, Me will probably be pre-installed. If you aren't comfortable using Me, you should be able to have Windows 98 Second Edition installed instead.

An announcement from Microsoft that it has a new operating system (OS) probably doesn't mean much, but how can you tell if you should upgrade or save your money? And, what does an operating system actually do?

From the outside, it doesn't seem like an operating system does much more than make your computer crash every now and again. From the inside, it's a different story. For starters, Windows keeps track of every program and application on your computer, and stores important information about it in a file called the registry. The registry remembers all the little details specific to each application — for example, that in Word you can repeat your last task by pressing F4, but that doesn't apply to another application.

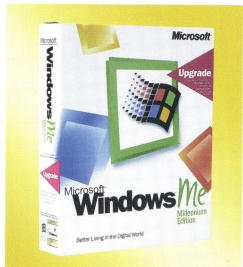
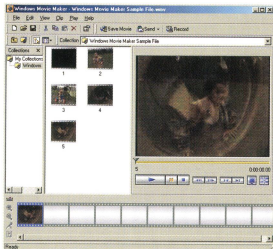
Not only that, your OS helps your software programs interact — for example, you can cut text out of a web page and paste it into your word processing document.

Memory manager

The OS is the layer between your hardware and the applications you use — acting as a translator for your computer, letting each component talk to all the others smoothly and seamlessly. That includes controlling access to all the important resources, like memory.

Your applications and hardware can't just use your computer's random access memory (RAM) willy-nilly. Sometimes different applications will try using the same bit of memory, and your computer won't be able to cope — it'll crash.

Edit movies on your computer with Windows Movie Maker, part of Windows Me.



WYNNE MARSHALL

That's where the OS steps in — allocating different parts of memory to different applications, like making unruly kids respect each other's 'personal space'.

Why upgrade to Me?

Windows Me does have a few new tricks:

- You can connect more than one computer simultaneously to the Internet (so it's handy in an office).
- It has a 'rollback' feature which, for example, deletes all of a program you want to uninstall, whereas now uninstalling can still leave bits of a program cluttering up your computer.
- Editing a digital video is easier.
- It protects your system files from being deleted. However, older programs may not work properly with Me, particularly virus checkers and utility software — you'll need to upgrade or update them. If you have an older computer, and you're considering Me, there are a couple of steps you'll need to take first.
- Check that your **software is compatible** with Me. You'll need to check with each manufacturer, which isn't a trivial undertaking. Some software will need updates or complete upgrades.
- Check that your **hardware is compatible** — Microsoft has a database of hardware for you to browse through at <http://www.microsoft.com/windowsme/upgrade/compat/default.asp>

■ Check that your computer meets the **system requirements**. For example, you'll need a 150 MHz processor, and 32 Mb RAM at minimum. Microsoft has two more planned OS releases in the near future — Windows XP and Windows.NET — so you may be better off waiting.

■ For more information about Windows Me: <http://www.microsoft.com/windowsme/>



For help upgrading to Windows Me, see the Jul/Aug 01 Computer CHOICE article *Upgrade to Me, Painlessly*.

Got the SHEETS?

More than 400 CHOICE Home Testers confirmed it: the more you pay, the better the chances you'll like a toilet paper. They also found a few good rolls that cost a little less than average.



IN A NUTSHELL

■ With only a few exceptions, the 15 best-liked brands are also the most expensive.

■ Recycled and unbleached brands were generally liked less.

Social custom and the weather largely prescribed what people around the world used before toilet paper was invented in the latter half of the 19th century. It's said that a mussel or coconut shell came in handy for tropical islanders; leaves, sticks or grass for forest dwellers; wool or lace and rosewater for the nobility; a cornucob on a string for rural Americans and a sponge on a stick for the Romans.

In Australia we've come a fair way from the days of torn-up newspaper in the outhouse. It's estimated that every person uses on average 43 rolls of toilet paper per year.

And we've come to expect increasing levels of comfort and appeal from the once humble roll. There's a huge variety to choose from: one, two or three-ply, plain, textured, white, coloured, printed, unbleached, recycled, scented or unscented.

With the help of more than 400 CHOICE Home Testers, we set out to find the best of 33 widely available brands. The table on page 37 lists all the brands trialled in rank order with an average unit price. And there are other interesting results and observations.

WHAT TO BUY

These are the five toilet papers the trialists liked best. The top-rated one was considered significantly more gentle, silky, soothing, thick and velvety than average, but it's also the most expensive by quite a margin. If you're looking for a cheaper roll that still scored above average, try **KLEENEX Double Length**, **FARMLAND Soft White**, **SYMPHONY** or **HOME BRAND So Soft**, which all cost below the average of \$0.58 for 250 sheets.

Price * (for 250 sheets)

KLEENEX Aloe Vera	\$1.32
KLEENEX Unscented	\$1.00
KLEENEX Velvety Soft 3 Ply	\$1.01
SORBENT Silk	\$0.91
KLEENEX	\$0.75

* Prices are based on those for a six-pack or closest equivalent, averaged and converted to a unit price for 250 sheets. They're based on nationwide checks (excluding specials) in March 2001.

The best and the worst

Our trialists scored highly toilet papers that not only did the job well but also felt, looked and smelt appealing. *Velvety, soothing, silky, thick, gentle, solid, textured and stretchy* were attributes rated highly in the trial; those that felt *irritating, weak, flimsy, scratchy, coarse, stiff or thin* were obviously less liked.

In the individual scoring categories, the following brands stood out.

Softness

- Best: KLEENEX Aloe Vera, SORBENT Silk and KLEENEX Unscented.
- Worst: DELSEY Unbleached.

Strength and absorbency

- Best: KLEENEX three-ply papers and SORBENT Silk.
- Worst: One-ply papers, ENCORE Treefree.

Thickness

- Best: KLEENEX three-ply papers and SORBENT Silk.
- Worst: All one-ply papers.

Smoothness

- Best: KLEENEX Aloe Vera.
- Worst: BLACK & GOLD, DELSEY Unbleached.

Smell

- Best: KLEENEX Aloe Vera, PUREX Embossed, SORBENT Silk and FARMLAND Soft White.
- Worst: HOME BRAND and SOFTEX Elite.

Appearance

- Best: KLEENEX Aloe Vera.
- Worst: SAFE Unbleached and Recycled and DELSEY Unbleached.

Environmental issues

■ Toilet paper made from recycled paper takes less energy and water to make (once the raw materials have reached the mill) and lowers the demand for woodchips.

If the term "recycled" is used without any other qualification on the packaging, it should be made solely from used waste paper (known as post-consumer waste paper). This is governed by a voluntary code — the Code of Practice for Environmental Marketing by the Personal Hygiene Products Industry. Most toilet paper manufacturers in Australia are signatories.

If other waste is included (such as industry offcuts, manufacturing waste and so on), it must say so on the packaging.

■ Products made from pine fibre use plantation timber. Those containing eucalypt and other hardwoods used to source most of the woodchips from Australian native forests. If it's from hardwood plantations instead, it's probably mentioned on the packaging.

■ Oxygen-based bleaching (usually with hydrogen peroxide) is less polluting than chlorine-bleaching, depending on the waste-water treatment process, and is the main alternative to chlorine bleaching.

Effluent from the chlorine bleaching process contains highly toxic organochlorines (such as dioxin). Using chlorine dioxide is preferable to gaseous chlorine because it reduces organochlorine emissions. However, it doesn't eliminate them.

■ Conservationists recommend using unbleached or not rebleached recycled paper. Economy-priced products, including "no name" brands, are often unbleached, and while they may not say so on the packaging, you can often tell by the colour.

■ While the plastic wrapping most toilet paper is sold in is made from a non-renewable resource, it's cheap, durable and relatively energy-efficient to make, though paper and cellulose wrapping can be composted.

For more on environmental claims on household paper products, check out our website, www.choice.com.au; just type "Shopping for household paper products" in the search box.

NOT SO GREEN

We asked our trialists about their toilet paper buying habits, including if environmental considerations influenced their choice. If the information was readily available on the packaging, the trialists were more likely than average to choose the environmentally preferred options: unbleached, sourced from plantation wood pulp or recycled from paper industry offcuts.

In the trial, however, they generally gave the thumbs down to the few brands of recycled and/or unbleached toilet

paper. None of these eight brands made it into the top half of the table. Although they scored similarly for strength, trialists generally scored these papers lower overall (including lower scores for smoothness, softness and absorbency).

Of course, the trialists didn't know which brands they used, or whether they were made from recycled paper or unbleached.

Our trial researchers organising the, um, packages.



PHONGA THAMTE

Brand (in rank order)	Overall score (%) *	Ply	Price (\$ / 250 sheets) **
KLEENEX Aloe Vera	89	3	1.32
KLEENEX Unscented	87	3	1.00
KLEENEX Velvety Soft 3 Ply	87	3	1.01
SORBENT Silk	85	2	0.91
KLEENEX	83	2	0.75
KLEENEX Double Length	79	2	0.56
FARMLAND Soft White	78	2	0.56
FIRST CHOICE	78	2	0.60
PASEO	77	3	0.70
SORBENT Hypo-allergenic	77	2	0.77
SYMPHONY	75	2	0.57
SYMPHONY Ultra	75	2	0.73
SORBENT Thick & Soft	74	2	0.78
IGA Classic	73	2	0.61
PUREX Embossed	73	2	0.64
HOME BRAND So Soft	68	2	0.44
WONDERSOFT	64	2	0.59
NO FRILLS 2-Ply	63	2	0.48
NATUREL 100% Recycled Not Rebleached	62	2	0.54
WONDERSOFT Double Length	62	2	0.50
SOFTX Forest-Free	61	2	0.58
ENCORE Treefree	59	2	0.48
BOUQUETS Gardenia Scented	58	2	0.59
SAFE Unbleached and Recycled	58	2	0.53
SAFE 100% Recycled	57	2	0.53
FARMLAND Biodegradable 2 Ply Unbleached	56	2	0.46
SOFTX Elite	55	2	0.53
SAVINGS	43	1	0.19
BI-LO	38	1	0.21
HOME BRAND	38	1	0.19
BLACK & GOLD	37	1	0.19
DELSEY Unbleached	36	1	0.32
NO FRILLS 1-PLY	32	1	0.19

* See The trial, above right, for information on the trial and score.

** Prices are based on those for a 6-pack or closest equivalent, averaged and converted to a unit price for 250 sheets (a single roll). They're based on nationwide checks (excluding specials) in March 2001.

FALLING APART

Toilet paper should disintegrate quickly in water to avoid clogging your plumbing. This is particularly important if you have a septic system. The toilet paper in the trial took on average just over half a minute to disintegrate completely (or until no piece was larger than 30% of the original size) in our test. There was one notable exception, though: DELSEY Unbleached took nearly four minutes to break up. This is a very thin one-ply paper which the trialists generally disliked, but it's claimed to be "suitable for all septic systems".



THE TRIAL

Thanks to the 400+ CHOICE Home Testers who each trialed five rolls (out of 33 brands) of toilet paper, the brand name of which was disguised.

Trialists rated each toilet paper overall, and gave individual scores for performance (smoothness, thickness, softness, absorbency and strength), appearance, fragrance and ease of use (how easy the roll was to start and the sheets were to tear and how well the plies of multiple-ply papers stayed together).

For each brand we had around 60 overall scores, which we averaged and converted to a percentage score.



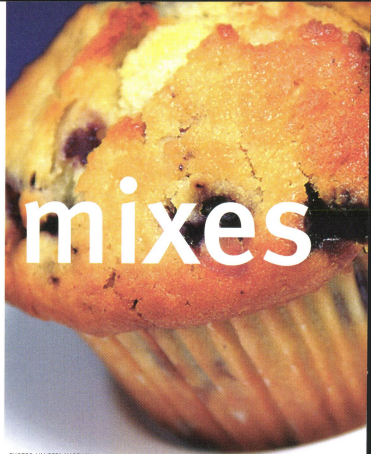
HOW MANY SHEETS?

No, we didn't sit down and count them, but we did check whether the number of sheets claimed matched reality. They did. In fact, over half the brands had more sheets per roll than claimed.

And no, we didn't work out a 'price per sheet' either. It's obvious that you'll use more of a thin one-ply paper and then there'd have been different-sized sheets to consider and...

MUFFIN mixes

Just stir, pop in the oven and voilà!
But do these muffin mixes taste any good?



PHOTOS: VANESSA MARSHALL

IN A NUTSHELL

■ Our panel of Home Testers liked most of the muffins — but the low-fat ones didn't do as well.

Nutrition — how does a muffin shape up?

If you're eating one of these muffins instead of a croissant with jam you're doing well. The croissant has about 19 g of fat and 303 calories compared to about 6 g of fat and 180 calories in a 55 g (regular) muffin.

And it's a better snack than a cinnamon doughnut as well — a 50 g doughnut has about 10 g of fat and 190 calories.

Become a hero at home: whip up a batch of blueberry muffins in 30 minutes flat! But will you still be a hero when the family tucks in? Yes, if you choose the brand they'll like — our panel of muffin tasters found at least three mixes they were very happy with (see *What to buy*, below).

Not surprisingly, the trialists liked muffins that were fluffy, light, moist, soft, sweet and had a berry-like flavour. Conversely, anything doughy, dry or rubbery wasn't their cup of tea.

Whether the blueberries were added from a separate tin or were part of the mixture didn't make a difference to the overall score (even though blueberries already in the mix were more likely to be described as 'chemical' and 'chewy'). But trialists noticed if they skimped on the blueberries — the mixes with the fewest blueberries were **DEFIANCE COUNTRY CHOICE Blueberry Low Fat Muffin Mix** ("blueberry 'bits' would be a better descriptor", one panellist said) and **GREEN'S de Lites Blueberry Muffin Shake** ("blueberries are in bits — very little ones").

And it seems that muffin mixes don't make the grade if they try to be healthier: trialists rated the low-fat varieties significantly lower overall (see the table far right).

WHAT TO BUY

HILLCREST Blueberry Muffin Mix	\$2.99
BETTY CROCKER Wild Blueberry Muffin Moments	\$3.41
WHITE WINGS Blueberry Muffins	\$3.38

* Available only in Aldi. See table note for details.

Preparation

The mixes were generally easy to prepare, but some trialists had difficulties with the **GREEN'S Blueberry Muffin Shake** — they found it tiring to shake the bottle and hard to get all the mixture out.

While the recommended cooking time was accurate for most mixes, a third of trialists found the cooking time for **DEFIANCE COUNTRY CHOICE Blueberry Low Fat Muffin Mix** too long; they had to take them out of the oven with five minutes still to go. And about two thirds of trialists found the cooking time recommended for **GREEN'S de Lites Blueberry Muffins** too short.

As a group, muffin mixes were rated as producing slightly better muffins than the ones you buy ready-made at supermarkets, but not as good as homemade ones or those from a good café.

	41g	
ENERGY	532kJ	1297kJ
PROTEIN	2.2g	5.4g
FAT	1.3g	3.2g
CARBOHYDRATE		
TOTAL	26.2g	63.9g
SUGARS	10.7g	26.0g
SODIUM	212mg	510mg

More than flour and water

You probably couldn't flop with one of these mixes if you tried. Apart from numerous raising agents, most contain plenty of gums (guar, xanthan, pectin) and other thickeners to ensure the mix 'performs'.

CHOICE HOME TESTER

THANKS TO OUR HOME PANEL

Over 90 CHOICE Home Testers baked up a storm to bring you these results — thanks, guys. We really appreciate it.

Each tester was given three brands of muffin mix to bake and eat. They completed a survey, commenting on and rating ease of preparation, accuracy of cooking time, appearance, taste and texture, and finally gave each mix an overall score.

The tasters didn't know which brands they were cooking and tasting. To prevent any brand bias, the contents were removed from the original boxes and the brand names disguised or removed.

Looking at the nutrition panel for Hillcrest Blueberry Muffin Mix you'd be forgiven for thinking it's low-fat. The panel gives figures for the dry mix, not prepared as all the others do — so the extra calories and fat from the added oil and eggs aren't taken into account.

Profiles

These were the three mixes the trialists liked best.

HILLCREST BLUEBERRY MUFFIN MIX

Price paid: \$2.99

Size: 500 g

Overall score: 73%

Comments: Muffins rose well, had a light texture and more blueberries than average. "I really liked the flavour... it was a very light muffin... easy to make and good result. I liked the aftertaste the blueberries left. I think the blueberries that come in a tin added to the flavour well. It seemed more like a home-made muffin..."



BETTY CROCKER WILD BLUEBERRY MUFFIN MOMENTS

Price paid: \$3.41

Size: 500 g

Overall score: 70%

Comments: The best texture of the lot and a "nice brown appearance. Much spongier than shop-bought, which tend to be doughier and fall apart." "These muffins looked like home-made muffins."

The instructions were very thorough. The taste was delicious."

WHITE WINGS BLUEBERRY MUFFINS

Price paid: \$3.38

Size: 500 g

Overall score: 69%

Comments: More flavour than average. "Very tasty, nice texture, though not as heavy as the supermarket or café type, which I prefer."

"Very good; I feel that a few more blueberries would be better and also if they used fresh blueberries it would improve the taste."



HOW THE MUFFINS PANNED OUT

Brand	Overall score (%) (D)	(A)
HILLCREST Blueberry Muffin Mix (A) (B)	71	(A) Available in Aldi only. Aldi is currently only operating in NSW but plans to expand nationwide.
BETTY CROCKER Wild Blueberry Muffin Moments (B)	70	(B) Tin of blueberries included.
WHITE WINGS Blueberry Muffins	69	(C) Low-fat varieties, with less than 3% fat.
GREEN'S Scrumptious Blueberry Muffins (B)	63	(D) The overall rating given by the taster.
GREEN'S Blueberry Muffin Shake	59	
BETTY CROCKER Wild Blueberry Sweet Rewards (B) (C)	58	
DEFIANCE COUNTRY CHOICE Blueberry Low Fat Muffin Mix (B) (C)	56	
GREEN'S de Lites Blueberry Muffins (B) (C)	56	

The CHOICE Guide to Baby Products



HOW TO Stay Sane in Your Baby's First Year

THE FRUITFUL FIRST YEAR
REVISED EDITION



saving spending splurging

and other stuff about money
kate hedderley

FRESH & HEALTHY

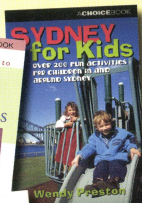
SALLY JAMES



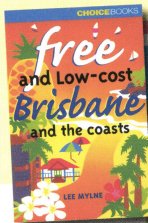
30 Secrets of the World's Healthiest Cuisines

Global Eating Tips and Recipes from China, France, Japan, the Mediterranean, Africa, and Scandinavia

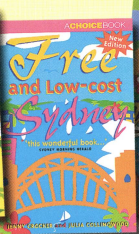
Steven Jones, M.D. • Sandra Gordon



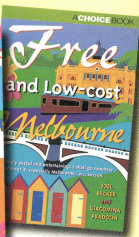
Wendy Preston



LEE MYLNE



LENNY COOPER and PAUL COOPERMAN



2011 PICKERS AND DISCOVERIES AWARDS WINNER

SYDNEY FOR KIDS

A guide to venues and activities in Sydney that are suitable and enjoyable for children. Each entry includes information about getting to the venue, amenities and prices.

\$16.50 CODE: SFK

CHOICE GUIDE TO BABY PRODUCTS

Australia's premier buying guide when you're choosing products for your new baby. Includes advice on cots and car restraints, from immunisation to strollers. Currently in its sixth edition!

\$18.00 CODE: CBP6

HOW TO STAY SANE IN BABY'S FIRST YEAR

This book covers all the major developmental stages and common problems that new parents will need to handle in their baby's first year. It focuses on all the important issues, including the big two: feeding and sleeping.

\$19.65 CODE: SSBY

SAVING SPENDING SPLURGING AND OTHER STUFF ABOUT MONEY

A new CHOICE book targeting 21–35 year olds — how to get your finances under control so you can have fun worry-free. Budgeting, saving, controlling credit, investing and your daily finances — it's all here. It also includes tips, strategies and advice on the pros and cons of renting vs buying, how to invest in shares, choosing a bank or insurance product, as well as references to more information on each topic discussed.

\$20.00 CODE: SSS

FREE AND LOW-COST FUN!

Looking for something to do in Brisbane, Melbourne or Sydney? Why not make the most of your time and money and read through CHOICE Books' *Free and Low-cost Sydney*, *Free and Low-cost Melbourne* and *Free and Low-cost Brisbane and the coasts* to get around.

Find out where you can go for a free (or almost free) fun day, or night. Examples include the taping of your favourite TV show or a lecture by a well-known personality, train rides, adventure playgrounds, poetry readings, museums or even cemetery visits. They're all in these books.

FREE AND LOW-COST BRISBANE AND THE COASTS

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FREE AND LOW-COST MELBOURNE

\$16.50 CODE: FLCM

FREE AND LOW-COST SYDNEY

\$16.50 CODE: FLS2

Or buy the set for \$45 and pay a single postage charge

CODE: FREE

FRESH & HEALTHY

The Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute has produced this healthy and appetising book of recipes. Each recipe includes kilojoules, calorie, fat and sodium details and each is tantalisingly appetising.

\$34.95 CODE: F&H

30 SECRETS OF THE WORLD'S HEALTHIEST CUISINES

Find out how to use the best nutritional principles and ingredients from the world's major cuisines. Includes recipes.

\$35.95 CODE: 30SW

new

EAT GST FREE!

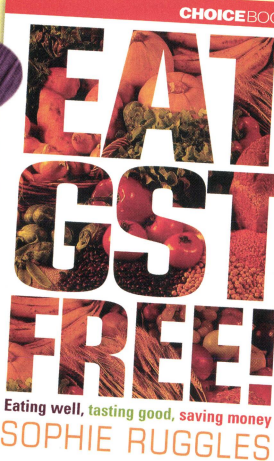
Sophie Ruggles

Eat GST Free! is the perfect gift for anyone moving out for the first time, single-income households or those watching their pennies.

It contains over 200 budget-conscious recipes that are easy to make, and tasty examples of traditional and modern Australian cuisine. It also shows you how to make savings of up to 500% by cooking at home rather than buying packaged or tinned foods in the supermarket.

Each recipe includes an itemised breakdown of the cost of ingredients and compares home production with the retail shelf price. For example, you can buy a 375 gram packet of pumpkin ravioli in the supermarket for about \$4.77; to make the same amount at home costs you only 56 cents. There's also important advice about safe storage times for the fridge and freezer. **And** as a bonus — by following the ideas in this book you won't pay GST on any of your food!

\$22 CODE: EGST



CHOICEBOOKS

ALL ABOUT BREAD

Written by an ardent bread lover and food scientist, this fascinating new book outlines the history of bread and the various grains used to make it, and the use of bread in religion, myth and folklore. It explains modern manufacturing methods and the differences between the various types of packaged bread, and discusses some of the nutritional claims made for special breads. It also includes recipes for making your own bread by hand or machine.

\$25 CODE: BRD

FOOD PRESERVING AT HOME

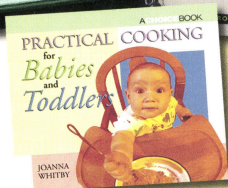
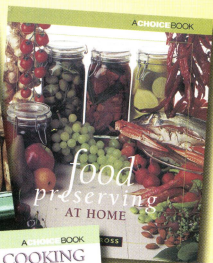
Take advantage of wonderful foods available at their peak and preserve the best to eat all year round. The clearly written instructions in this book will have you drying, smoking, bottling and jamming with the best of them!

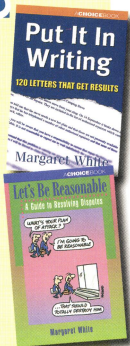
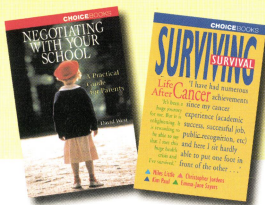
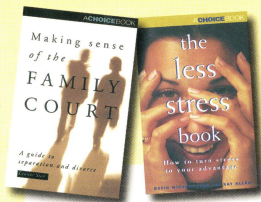
\$29.70 CODE: FPAH

PRACTICAL COOKING FOR BABIES AND TODDLERS

Over 100 delicious and nutritious recipes for the whole family — no matter how young! Each recipe has symbols showing the age group it's suitable for and whether it can be microwaved or frozen for later use. It even includes fun stuff like playdough!

\$22 CODE: PCFB





MAKING SENSE OF THE FAMILY COURT

Dealing with the Family Court isn't simple. But the advice and explanations in this book will make things easier and a little less stressful. Includes advice about forms, proceedings and terminology.

\$17.60 CODE: MSFC

PUT IT IN WRITING

Learn how to write the right letter to get the results you want! With 120 adaptable letters you will always be able to write the most effective letter for your situation.

\$18.00 CODE: PIWF

LET'S BE REASONABLE

Next time you are in a conflict situation have the tactics and strategies you can use at your fingertips. A commonsense guide to alternative dispute resolution.

\$16.50 CODE: LBR

BUY BOTH

Let's Be Reasonable and Put It In Writing for \$32 and only pay a single postage charge.

\$32.00 CODE: WHIT

THE LESS STRESS BOOK

Not all stress is bad – but too much certainly is and that's where *The Less Stress Book* can help. Using clear descriptions and easy-to-follow checklists and exercises, you can reduce the bad stress in your life and improve the way you react to all stress.

\$17.60 CODE: LSB

NEGOTIATING WITH YOUR SCHOOL: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR PARENTS

A simple system for solving problems when your child is in trouble at school (whether state or private). Includes information on suspensions, privacy, negotiating with your child, teachers and principals, sample letters, and a special chapter for non-custodial parents.

\$20.00 CODE: NWYS

SURVIVING SURVIVAL: LIFE AFTER CANCER

Over 75,000 Australians are newly diagnosed each year with a serious form of cancer, and as diagnosis and treatment improve more people are surviving. For survivors and their intimates and carers, however, survival is sometimes as difficult to deal with as the illness itself.

\$25.00 CODE: SURV

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CB/0107

COUNTER

Automatic sensors in the latest microwaves do the work for you, and there's even a PIN for child safety. So how well do they cook?

intelligence



PHOTOS: RHONDA THWAITE

IN A NUTSHELL

- The two SHARP microwaves stood out above the rest with 80% or more for both cooking and ease of use — and the **R-380D** is the only model with an operation guide and step-by-step instructions on the panel display.
- Automatic defrost functions vary in type and how well they work: check them out in What to look for on page 44.
- The sensor cook and reheat features of the **SHARP R-380D** and **PANASONIC NN-S560WF** monitor the oven's humidity, and gave great results when the feature was used.

Lots of people use a microwave mainly for reheating food, so a sensor reheat function is a good idea — it turns the oven off as soon as the food is hot enough to boil the water in it, so you don't even need to set a time or weight. This function gave by far the best results for reheating in our tests.

Defrosting's the other great use for a microwave, and automatic defrost features keep on getting better, though they still don't give perfect results (see What to look for for more on these and other features).

All the ovens tested cooked great broccoli, but they couldn't handle defrosting and reheating various foods with equal finesse. The two models in the What to buy list stood out, but the six we profiled should keep you happy too if you find them at a good price.

And our tests show it's still important to watch out for hot or cold spots in food that's been heated or cooked in a microwave — only one model, the **SHARP R-340D**, scored well in our 'hedgehog' test (pictured, page 45), designed to check whether food you can't stir has been heated evenly; standing time is important to distribute the heat.

The test included 11 models with a capacity of around 30–35 L.

STANDBY POWER

Up to half the power used by your microwave over a year may be when it's on standby, or when the only thing that's on is the clock. While this only costs a few dollars per year for each microwave, around 90% of Australian households have one, so running them collectively on standby produces about 120,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide per year (most of our power is generated by power plants that burn fossil fuels). The table on page 46 gives the cost of standby power consumption per year as well as the yearly cost of running each model if you're simply heating a meal once a day.



WHAT TO BUY

SHARP R-380D	\$362
SHARP R-340D	\$307

What to look for

■ **The basics:** Look for a microwave with easy-to-use controls and instructions, a bright light and large, clear viewing window. Make sure your microwave-safe cooking dishes and utensils will fit. There should be about 10 cm of space around the oven for ventilation.

The table on page 46 shows which models have the following features.

■ **Automatic functions** for defrosting, cooking and reheating are convenient for common foods if the size the feature uses suits you.

■ **Automatic defrost features** usually allow you to enter the weight and type of food, and the oven calculates the time. The SHARP R-380D and the SHARP R-340D have an additional 'express defrost' feature, which rapidly defrosts half a kilo of specific foods, such as fish and chicken fillets, sausages and mince, with similar results to the automatic 'easy defrost' feature. The JNL JNL3001 has an additional 'jet defrost' feature, where you set the time and the food is heated at a series of power levels set by the manufacturer (starting at medium-high and then progressively reducing to medium-low); unfortunately, it partially cooked the mince.

■ **A sensor cook and reheat function** measures vapours in the oven when cooking or reheating, so you don't need to set time or weight. It gave excellent results in our tests.

■ **Quick/boosted start:** A handy way of starting the oven, usually by pressing a single button. With most models, the cooking time increases, in one or half-minute steps, if the button's pressed again.

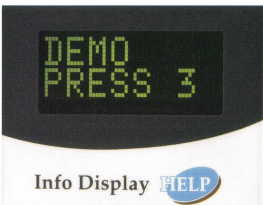
■ **Adjust time during cooking (more/less):** Allows you to change the time programmed during cooking.

■ **Multi-stage programming:** On all models, the oven can be programmed to perform a sequence of functions, for example: defrost, cook, then leave to stand.

■ **Child safety lock:** All these models allow you to enter a sequence of numbers to deactivate the microwave. It's also handy when you're cleaning the controls.

■ **Help or demonstration functions:** The SHARP R-380D has a help feature on the display that gives instructions on how to set programs, for example to auto start, it has simple food preparation hints for auto cooking and defrosting, it gives instructions during cooking or defrosting, such as to turn or stir the food, and both SHARP models have a demonstration mode that allows you to enter a key sequence, and then practise operations without power in the oven.

■ **Kitchen timer:** All models can be used to time other things, such as boiling an egg.



Info Display **HELP**

Sharp help mode.

Profiles

The top six models are profiled in rank order, from left to right



SHARP R-380D

RRP: \$362

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent for reheating a typical meal (using its automatic function).
- One of only two tested models with a sensor cook and reheat function (see *What to look for*, left).

■ Has a help feature, including an operation guide and a demonstration mode, on the display panel (See *What to look for* and photo, below left).

■ An alarm goes off if food is left in the oven after cooking.

■ Express defrost rapidly defrosts half kilo amounts of set foods such as fish or chicken fillets, sausages and mince (see *What to look for*).

BAD POINTS

- None to mention.



LG MS-314F

RRP: \$339

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent result for cooking broccoli manually.
 - Excellent result for reheating a plate of food manually.
 - Food weight measurements are in both pounds and kilos.
- BAD POINTS**
- Only OK for auto defrosting mince.



NEC NM302E

RRP: \$269

GOOD POINTS

- Excellent result for cooking broccoli manually.
 - Good to very good results for auto defrosting.
- BAD POINTS**
- Poor score for auto reheating a meal.



SHARP R-340D

RRP: \$307

GOOD POINTS

- Best at manually reheating fairly dense food that can't be stirred.
- Has a demonstration mode.
- An alarm goes off if food is left in the oven after cooking.
- Express defrost rapidly defrosts half kilo amounts of set foods such as fish or chicken fillets, sausages and mince.

BAD POINTS

- None to mention.



LG MS-304A

RRP: \$309

GOOD POINTS

- Best at manual and second best at automatic cooking.
- Good manual defrost and reheat and automatic defrost scores.

BAD POINTS

- No automatic reheat function.



PANASONIC NN-S560WF

RRP: \$369

- An inverter is used in both PANASONICS instead of the usual power transformer; it's supposed to generate more wattage — cooking power — and so to cook faster and more energy-efficiently, as well as to allow more interior space, a larger turntable and a lighter oven. This oven is light, but

our tests didn't show any other advantages of the new technology. **GOOD POINTS**

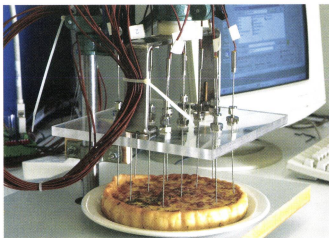
- Excellent result for auto reheating a meal and auto cooking broccoli.
- One of only two models tested with a sensor cook and reheat function.

BAD POINTS

- The inverter is claimed to give better cooking and more even heating, but models with it didn't do better overall in our performance tests than models with transformers.
- The instructions are tricky to follow — they relate to three different models.
- Poor result for auto defrosting mince.
- Low score for manually reheating fairly dense food that can't be stirred.

WHAT ABOUT THE REST?

- The NEC NM352E generally cooked well, but got a poor result for auto reheating a meal, a low score for reheating a fairly dense food that can't be stirred and the door isn't easy to clean.
- The PANASONIC NN-S540WF generally cooked well, but despite its new inverter technology it scored very poorly for auto defrosting mince and it was only OK for reheating a fairly dense food that can't be stirred. Its instructions are confusing because they relate to three models, and the door isn't easy to clean.
- The SMEG SA32M generally cooked well, but got a low score for reheating a fairly dense food that can't be stirred, and it and the following two models were the hardest to use.
- The NEC N712E scored poorly for automatically reheating a meal, and it's difficult to see through the door, which isn't easy to clean.
- The JNL JNL3001 auto defrosted mince very well, but got a low score for reheating a fairly dense food that can't be stirred; it doesn't have automatic cook and reheat functions; the jet defrost feature performed poorly; it's difficult to see through the door; it isn't clearly labelled; and the instructions are basic with only a few diagrams.



Our hedgehog checks food temperatures to determine how evenly the microwave heats unstirred food.

PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY

- For people with a hand-related disability, look for a door that's easy to open. Of the five adequate models (the JNL JNL3001, the three NEC models and the SMEG SA32M), only the NEC NM302E is towards the top of the list of overall scores. Raised touchpads or buttons make it easier to locate the controls and, in general, a smaller turntable plate's lighter to handle.
- For the vision-impaired, an easy to read display is best, like that of the SHARP R-340D, which also has pictures of the foods on the auto cook/reheat pads, and a well-lit oven with a see-through door. The SHARP R-380D has helpful step-by-step instructions on the display panel.

Brand / model (in rank order)	PERFORMANCE			4 FEATURES						SPECIFICATIONS		
	1 Overall score (%)	2 Performance score (%)	3 Ease of use score (%)	Auto cook	Auto reheat	Auto defrost	Sensor cook / reheat	Quick / boosted start	Adjust time during cooking (more / less)	Volume (claimed / usable; L)	5 Power output (claimed / measured; W)	Measure external dimension (H x W x D; cm)
SHARP R-380D	84	84	84	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	34 / 23	1100 / 1160	31 x 52 x 46
SHARP R-340D	83	84	80	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	34 / 23	1100 / 1170	31 x 52 x 46
LG MS-304A	78	79	77	✓		✓		✓	✓	30 / 20	900 / 980	33 x 53 x 46
LG MS-314F	76	76	77	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	31 / 23	1000 / 1070	32 x 53 x 46
NEC NM302E	75	74	77	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	30 / 21	1000 / 1130	32 x 53 x 46
PANASONIC NN-S560WF	74	74	74	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	32 / 25	1100 / 1030	31 x 52 x 46
NEC NM352E	72	69	77	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	35 / 26	1000 / 1100	32 x 56 x 46
PANASONIC NN-S540WF	71	70	74		✓	✓				32 / 25	1100 / 1070	31 x 52 x 46
SMEG SA32M	71	73	66	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	29 / 21	950 / 1000	35 x 53 x 46
NEC N712E	69	70	65	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	33 / 23	900 / 940	32 x 57 x 46
JNL JNL3001	68	72	60			✓		✓		30 / 20	900 / 970	31 x 53 x 46

* Depth includes the handle at the front and mouldings at the rear, but not spacers. All rounded up to the next centimetre.

(A) Plus extra three years on magnetron.

(B) Optional warranty for additional two years (\$40) or four years (\$60).

1 Overall score

The overall score is a combination of cooking performance and ease of use, weighted as follows:

Performance: 70%.

Ease of use: 30%.

2 Performance score

Each oven was assessed for defrosting chicken and mince, cooking broccoli and cake, and reheating non-stirtable food and a typical meal. Except for cooking the cake and reheating non-stirtable food (manual only), the functions were carried out in both auto and manual modes, with equal weighting given to each.

If an oven didn't have an auto function (see the Cooking performance table) it wasn't penalised, as different people may or may not find it useful — use the table to check whether a model has the functions you'd use. The performance score is an average of all the cooking scores.

3 Ease of use score

This was weighted as follows:

Ease of using the controls: 40%.

Ease of cleaning: 30%.

Visibility during cooking: 30%.

4 Features

For an explanation of these, see *What to look for*, on page 44.

5 Power output

We measured the power output of the ovens to compare with the manufacturer's claimed output — all except the two **PANASONIC** models have a higher output than claimed.

6 Running costs

This shows the yearly cost of running each microwave if you simply heat a meal once a day.

7 Standby power cost per year

This is the yearly cost for each microwave on standby — when you're not using it at all it still costs you money.

COOKING PERFORMANCE SCORES

Brand / model (in rank order)	AUTO DEFROST		AUTO COOK		AUTO REHEAT
	Chicken	Mince	Broccoli	Typical meal	
SHARP R-380D	4	4	5	5	
SHARP R-340D	4	4	4	4	
LG MS-304A	4	4	5		(A)
LG MS-314F	4	3	4	3	
NEC NM302E	4	5	5	5	
PANASONIC NN-S560WF	3	1	5	5	
NEC NM352E	4	5	4	1	
PANASONIC NN-S540WF	3	0	5	3	
SMEG SA32M	4	4	5	3	
NEC N712E	4	4	5	1	

(A) This model doesn't have the tested feature.

HOW RELIABLE HAVE SUBSCRIBERS FOUND THEM?

We asked a group of subscribers if they'd had any problems with their microwave over the previous 12 months and whether they'd buy the same brand again.

Only about one in 20 had needed repair, with the average cost of repair \$96. The most common problem was a blown oven light.

The graphs show results for the brands we received enough responses to report on, and the number in brackets tells you how many reported on the brand. Note that the results are for all microwaves, not just the mid-sized ones tested this time. They don't cover all brands on the market and they include brands we didn't test this time.

Measured internal height maximum diameter that can rotate (cm)	6 Running cost/year: reheating a typical meal once a day (\$)	7 Standby cost/year (\$)	Warranty (years)	Origin	Manufacturer / distributor	Recommended retail price (\$)
23 / 35	4.20	4.40	1	Thailand	Sharp	362
23 / 35	3.65	2.00	1	Thailand	Sharp	307
22 / 34	4.30	3.00	2 (A)	Korea	LG	309
24 / 35	3.80	2.00	2 (A)	Korea	LG	339
22 / 35	3.00	2.05	1	Korea	NEC	269
22 / 38	4.95	2.70	1 (B)	China	Panasonic	369
23 / 38	3.00	1.75	1	Korea	NEC	309
22 / 38	4.45	2.70	1 (B)	China	Panasonic	279
23 / 34	2.95	4.15	2	Korea	Omega	465
21 / 37	3.00	4.20	1	Korea	NEC	289
20 / 35	4.25	3.05	2	China	JNL Electronics	249

MANUAL DEFROST		MANUAL COOK		MANUAL REHEAT		EVENNESS OF HEATING
Mince	Broccoli	Butter cake	Typical meal	Non-stirrable food		
4	5	4	4	3		
4	5	4	5	4		
4	5	5	3	3		
5	5	4	5	3		
5	5	4	4	3		
4	5	5	3	2		
3	5	5	4	2		
4	5	5	5	3		
4	4	4	3	2		
4	4	4	3	3		

Cooking performance table
Overall, most (not all) were better at manual cooking than automatic, and there were differences in what they were best at — some defrosted better than they reheated, for example.

The scores:
5 = excellent.
4 = good to very good.
3 = OK.
2 = borderline.
1 = poor.
0 = very poor.

TIPS ON MICROWAVE COOKING

Microwave radiation is generated in an electronic tube called a magnetron, and passes along a waveguide into the metal oven cavity — you're protected from radiation escaping by a metal mesh across the window.

Cooking occurs by the water in the food being heated. The microwaves penetrate the food, but only to a depth of about 20 mm on the top and sides of the food, and about 10–15 mm on the bottom (when food is standing on the base of the oven), so the centre can sometimes remain undercooked in bigger items like a whole chicken. Microwaves don't heat uniformly — there are cold spots and hot spots — which is why you need to turn the food while it's cooking and let it stand afterwards to even out the heat.

Dividing food into small portions helps ensure it'll be adequately heated throughout; low-moisture foods (like biscuits) and porous foods (like bread and cake) take less time to heat than compact foods like meat and potatoes; foods with a high fat content reach higher temperatures in a shorter time.

All the microwaves in the test are electrically safe, and safe from microwave radiation leakage — we've never tested one in working order that wasn't. But if the door, door frame or mesh on the window is damaged there's a danger of radiation leakage, so you'll need to have it serviced.

For more on this and other issues related to safety and cooking in microwaves, such as the effect on food, uneven heating, superheated water and other burn risks, plus which cookware to use in them, go to www.choice.com.au and type 'microwave safely' in the search box.

PERCENTAGE NOT NEEDING REPAIR

Philips (161)	97
Panasonic (83)	96
Sharp (1568)	95
Toshiba (146)	95
NEC (127)	94
Panasonic (1586)	94
Westinghouse (62)	94
Whirlpool (52)	94
Sanyo (365)	93
Samsung (100)	90

PERCENTAGE WHO WOULD BUY THE SAME BRAND AGAIN

Panasonic (1601)	99
Philips (163)	98
Sharp (1598)	98
Westinghouse (64)	97
Sanyo (361)	95
Toshiba (145)	95
NEC (127)	92
Whirlpool (52)	92
Panasonic (86)	84
Samsung (99)	80

RECALLS & BANS

If you find a recall or ban not on our list, please let us know. Companies often rent 1800 numbers for a couple of months after the recall is announced. If the number given is no longer operating, phone the manufacturer or retailer direct.

THE PRODUCT: Waterco has recalled suction-fitting in-ground removable **swimming pool drain covers** and in-floor cleaning systems with a removable basket and cover, that sit in the base of the pool and collect leaves, sold to pool builders in NSW and Queensland from late 1994 until March 2001.

The problem: The cover and basket can be removed and if not replaced in the housing at the bottom of the pool may cause an entrapment hazard.

What to do: If you haven't already responded to notification from Waterco, contact them on (02) 9898 1899, to arrange for the cover to be replaced with a permanently fixed cover for free, or for help in working out if your pool's affected.

THE PRODUCT: Onga has recalled **Dega main drain lids** with a lid radius of 226.5 mm, in white (1022000) or brown (1022001) – in-ground swimming pool drain covers normally fitted to the main drain in the deepest part of the pool. It may be connected directly to the pool pump to allow circulation and filtration, and was sold to pool builders from late 1993 to August 1999.

The problem: The cover may be removed without tools, which may pose an entrapment hazard.

What to do: Contact Onga on 1800 787 250, to register for the cover to be replaced free of charge.

THE PRODUCT: Zee Medical has recalled the following **Trafalgar First Aid Kit Components – Aust L72409 – FIRST AIDERS CHOICE WOUND DRESSING**, NUMBER 14, Batch nos 20000518 & 20000819; **FIRST AIDERS CHOICE EYE PAD**, Batch no 20000819; and **FIRST AIDERS CHOICE GAUZE SWABS**, 7.5 cm square pkt6, Batch no 20000819.

The problem: The batches may not be sterile.

What to do: Do not use. Return it to the place of purchase for a refund, or call Zee Medical's Customer Service line on (02) 9621 8951 to arrange for the return and refund.

THE PRODUCT: Toys R Us has recalled **Alphabet Pals** from Leap Frog, identified

by manufacturer no. 46000 and Skn no. 078182.

The problem: The Alphabet Pals' red plastic connector (attached to the pull string) can come apart and separate from the toy, creating a choking hazard to small children.

What to do: Return the Alphabet Pal to the place of purchase for free repair, cut off the red plastic connector or phone Toys R Us on (02) 9794 8951 during business hours (EST) to get a replacement toy without the red plastic connector.

THE PRODUCT: Dell Computer Corp has recalled **batteries** for Dell Inspiron 5000 notebook computers, sold with the Dell Inspiron 5000 series of notebook computers (both the Inspiron 5000 and Inspiron 5000e models) direct to consumers, and sold separately through Dell and its authorised service providers, from January 7, 2000, to March 21, 2001. The batteries have "DELL", "MADE IN JAPAN" and "Inspiron 5000 Battery Module" written on the top, and insert into the front left or front right of the notebook computer.

The problem: The batteries could overcharge and get very hot, releasing smoke and possibly igniting.

What to do: Remove the batteries. Contact Dell through the website, at <http://support.dell.com/j5000battery/>, or phone Dell on 1800 505 190, (if you haven't already responded to their mailout) to determine if you are affected and, if so, organise for free replacement of the batteries.

THE PRODUCT: Electrical Visual Evolution (Njoya Industries) has recalled **Electric Resistor Sunglasses** featuring the word "RESISTOR", and a lens width of 26 mm (some also have a sticker with the words "Electric Kids" stuck onto their lenses). The sunglasses were sold from September 2000 to February 2001, from the Rip Curl store in Torquay, Victoria and from Jetty Surf stores in Victoria, SA and Tasmania.

The problem: The sunglasses don't comply with the mandatory safety standard for sunglasses – the size of their lenses is too small, so they don't provide enough sun protection and could lead to increased risk of damage

to the eyes if exposed to the sun.

What to do: Don't wear the sunglasses. Return them to the place of purchase or to the following address for a refund: Njoya Industries, 45/5 Ponderosa Parade, Warriewood NSW 2103. For more information: ph: (02) 9999 4320, fax: (02) 9999 3714.

THE PRODUCT: Targus Australia has recalled **retractable telephone cords** with RJ-11 clips, product no PA200L, sold from September 1998 to March 2001, and **retractable network ISDN cords**, product no PA210L, sold from December 2000 to March 2001.

The problem: Under certain circumstances, using the retractable telephone cord may pose a risk of electrocution to consumers, and both products may, if ignited, cause a fire to spread.

What to do: Don't use either cord, and return to Targus Australia for a refund (including postage) or a replacement: PO Box 1012, Meadowbank, 2114, enclosing full contact details and, for the phone cord, whether you want a refund or a replacement product. For further information contact Carole Jess on 1800 641 645 or (02) 9807 1222.

THE PRODUCT: BMW Australia has recalled **F650 GS & F650 GS Dakar** motorcycles, due to a problem with the rear brake callipers. Affected motorbikes have the following VIN ranges: **F650 ZE36094–ZE42484** and **F650 GS Dakar ZF60130–ZF63743**

The problem: Under extreme conditions (eg. applying the rear brake at the same time as full throttle) the bracket on which the rear brake calliper rests may bend, possibly leading to failure of the rear brake.

What to do: Contact any authorised BMW Motorcycle Dealer immediately to arrange for repairs to made free of charge, in about half an hour. For more information you can also phone the BMW Access Centre on 1800 813 299.

THE PRODUCT: Yamaha Australia has recalled the **Yamaha motorcycle** model XV660A/L, with VIN ranges from JYAVP0827XA00004 to JYAVP0820XA000488.

The problem: If the bolts that hold the exhaust system loosen, the bracket

holding the mufflers can break and cause the mufflers to fall off the motorbike (causing a traffic hazard), which can damage or loosen the rear hydraulic brake hose and lead to loss of rear braking ability.

What to do: Avoid riding the motorcycle. Contact any authorised Yamaha dealer to organise for modifications to be made free of charge, phone Yamaha on (02) 9757 0004, or visit the Yamaha website at www.yamaha-motor.com.au.

THE PRODUCT: NF Importers has recalled **Ducati Performance brand handlebar mounting bracket kit**, an optional accessory that can be fitted to Ducati 748, 916 and 996 model motorcycles.

The problem: The mounting brackets could fracture or break, which could cause complete loss of steering and control of the motorbike.

What to do: Do not ride the motorbike if these Ducati Performance parts are fitted to it. Contact your local authorised Ducati dealer immediately to arrange for replacement parts to be fitted for free. For further information contact NF Importers on (02) 9748 7833.

THE PRODUCT: Honda Australia has recalled 1998 and 1999 year model, V6 and V6i **Honda Accord** vehicles with the following VIN ranges:

From	To
1HGGC1650WA600010	603659
MRHCK1650XP000031	001530
MRHCK1650YP000001	000540
MRHCK1640YP010001	010270
MRHCK1640YP000001	000150

The problem: A transistor may fail within the multiplex control unit, which could cause the instrument panel dimmer lamp to fail.

What to do: If you haven't already responded to notification, contact your local authorised Honda dealer to organise for free repair of the multiplex control unit. For further information, phone Honda Australia on 1800 804 954.

Weekly updates of recalls and bans are posted on the CHOICE website at www.choice.com.au. You can also email us any recalls or bans not on this list at consumers@choice.com.au.



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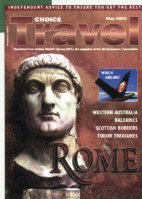
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To whet your appetite, here are some picks from the current information available on www.choice.com.au.

IN DEEP MID-WINTER...

It's time to rug up in front of the heater, indulge in comfort food and battle the dreaded winter lurgies – our site can help.

For advice on heating your home, type 'heating options' into the search box on the home page.

■ You'll find information about the different types of heater and fuel, and selectors to work out the right heater size for your situation, the best models to buy, heating tips to save you money, and a rundown on the pros and cons of the main heating fuels.

■ For more on heating type 'reverse-cycle' into the search box and click on the article. This includes information on reverse-cycle air conditioning and other forms of central heating – 'ducted gas air heating', 'hydronic heating' and 'in-slab heating'.

■ You'll also find more about keeping your house at a comfortable temperature with energy efficient strategies from the CHOICE book *Warm House, Cool House*, available from our online shop, just type 'warm house' in the search box.

We've lots of yummy, hearty meal and dessert ideas and comforting snacks to try, too – Hungarian lentil soup, chicken or seafood laksa, date and ginger puddings with butterscotch sauce, pear and raisin strudel, roasted vegetable lasagne, choc fruit and nut cookies, almond biscotti... type 'recipe home page' in the search box to find them, and scroll down and click on the one you want to make.

And, if you fancy a nice drop of red on a wintry night don't forget our shiraz test – it'll point you to the good cheapies if you just type 'shiraz with pizzazz' in our search box.

ALL ABOUT RICE

To find out about the characteristics of different kinds of rice, from arborio through to wild rice and what the different varieties are good for, enter 'all about rice' in the search box on the home page.

We tell you easy methods for cooking rice on a stovetop or in a microwave, and there are links to take you from here to our recent test of electric rice cookers.

There's also a nutritional breakdown of brown rice and white rice, and links to our recipes for chicken and coriander risotto, and barbecued fish with wild rice stuffing.

DOOR-TO-DOOR SALES

A salesperson's come-a-knocking. Should you buy, or could you risk being stuck with a dud? What are your rights in this situation?

Type in 'door-to-door' in the search box on the home page for our advice.

We help you spot 'fly-by-nighters' from legitimate salespeople, deal with faulty goods and give you the low-down on refunds.

Follow our tips to boost your confidence in dealings with door-to-door salespeople, and to help you get the best result from their services.

And there are links to contacts for advice if you've already run into trouble.

HAVE A SAY ONLINE

Our forums are your chat space – the place to have a say and add your experience to others.

Click on 'forums' in the top left corner of the homepage, and you're on the way to talking with fellow CHOICE Onlineers about all kinds of topics and issues, from bank fees, to interesting ways to combat snails, 'computers and phones', 'energy and environment', 'food and drink', 'health', 'money', 'house and home', 'leisure and lifestyle', 'your rights' and 'talk to us'. Click on one and you'll find a list of related topics to select from.

Current hot discussions focus on the new supermarket on the block – Aldi, or problems with mobile phones, for example, and there are lots of tips from other consumers – there's even an explanation for how to understand date marking on Diet Coke.

While we can't guarantee that everything you'll find in our forums is accurate, it gives you a chance to air your views, or grievances. You can ask us for advice too.

And there are links to take you easily from here to our polls, where you can cast a vote, or to other related articles. ■



RHONDA THWALE

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TEST RESEARCH (NATA-accredited) provides independent, fee-for-service testing and research on consumer products, services and regulatory issues for other consumer organisations, governments and industry; under some conditions it undertakes public testing. Contact Jeannette Dwyer on (02) 9577 3399.

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The Australian Consumers' Association is governed by an honorary Council elected by the voting members. (For information about voting membership, contact CHOICE Consumer Information on (02) 9577 3399.) Members of the Council give their time without reimbursement, and are not engaged as principals in industry, advertising or sales.

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HOW TO USE THIS INDEX

Bold type indicates a test, survey or trial report, normal type indicates other articles.

* Indicates an update of a previous report, additions or corrections to reports, small follow-up items or letters. For space reasons, the index generally doesn't include Choice Cuts, many other small pieces, and Recalls and Bans.

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BECOME A FRIEND OF THE CONSUMERS' ASSOCIATION

Australian Consumers' Association



The Australian Consumers' Association is completely funded by our subscribers, book purchasers and other customers. We don't receive ongoing funding from government or any commercial source. Your donation or request to ACA will assist our work of informing and representing Australian consumers. To make a donation or for further information, call Megan (pictured) on (02) 9577 3399 or write to: Friends of the ACA, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204.

THE HARD WORD

So the purpose of the mop ...

• Ideal for domestic and commercial cleaning

• Cleans all types of clean surfaces

ELECTROSTATIC MOP
Collects and holds dust like magic!



... is what, exactly?

Best before when?

Modness!

BEST BEFORE
此日期前最佳

Our reader was concerned that by the time he'd learnt the language, it'd be too late!

EIGHT TONGUE SETTINGS, EH?



Would that include loose tongue, sharp tongue, tongue-in-cheek and tongue-and-groove?

Or perhaps it's one of those word association games: torque, talk, tongue... Or maybe they just don't know what they're torquing about.

DRIVING US NUTS!

We're used to seeing the 'May contain traces of nuts' warning in all manner of foods, from chocolate and biscuits to cakes and breakfast cereal. But really, we hope that a bag of Jumbo Peanuts *would* contain peanuts!

Natural & Healthy Ingredients

NUTS, SUGAR,
VANILLA GLUCOSE
NO PRESERVATIVES
MAY CONTAIN PEANUTS

HOW ABOUT A LITTLE HELP?

The Hard Word would like to thank all the readers who've responded with examples

of outrageous ads, promotions and products. Thanks to A Amos, D Ekman, A Heffer, S McIntyre, D McNulty, C Mikulic, C Rowe and L Tonkin for their contributions to this month's *Hard Word*. Please keep sending them in.

If you have any examples you think deserve to be on this page, send them to *The Hard Word*, CHOICE, 57 Carrington Road, Marrickville 2204, or email your suggestions to thehardword@choice.com.au.

A request from our art team: If you send us clippings, labels or packaging, please keep them as clean and neat as possible (and don't mark them with highlighters or pens or cut the corners off, etc) so we can reproduce them on this page. Thank you.

Question is, will the Psoriasis & Skin Clinic seek compensation for the loss of its eyes?

PSORIASIS & Skin Clinic
Tired of medications which don't work? Give Psoriasis the treatment it deserves!
Gain control of Psoriasis by very simply addressing the TRIGGERS which set it off!
We specialise in PSORIASIS CONTROL
Appointments Phone: 02 9550 1111
Miranda, Bonelli Jotin, Nth Sydney

Medical Negligence
...what you really must know
Can you claim worthwhile compensation for your Medical or Dental injury? What's involved and how long will it take? Will an expert lawyer work for you on a no-win-no-fee basis?
To have a relaxed chat on the phone with an experienced lawyer to find out exactly where you stand, call Lindafield Law Practice now on 02 9550 1111

www.northernheraldtimes.com.au

Too obscure?
Try reading it out aloud...

18PK
Toilet Tissue
Disposable
freshly scented
Equates to approx. 42c a roll. Reg. \$8.54.
SAVE \$4
Pack of 18 **754**

What does one normally do with used toilet paper, if not dispose of it?